

## Writing Asian Diasporas and Envisioning Shifting Identities in the Art of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha

The woman who begins her struggle from language is carrying out a many-sided task: she is trying not only to 'express the unexpressable' (as Barthes says), she writes (in) the space where the question of saying, of being able to say and of wanting to say is asked.

(Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Framer Framed*)

### She – of the interval

In this essay I analyse the visual and written artworks by two contemporary Asian writers and filmmakers who immigrated to the United States – the post-colonial female artists Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha. My analysis is meant to contribute to a criticism interested in the politics of migration, exile and translation. It is a critical attempt to focus on Asian female authors, while interrogating the conditions of their interpellation of the West, where they seem to be trapped in specific orientalist discourses. In my reading, I am guided by the concept of 'writing diaspora', which I borrow from Rey Chow's collection of essays with the same title.<sup>1</sup> In this key text, the cultural critic from Hong Kong asks: "how can women speak? How do women intervene? How can women articulate their difference without having that difference turned into a cultural ghettoization?"<sup>2</sup> Part of the goal of writing diaspora is thus to unlearn that submission to one's ethnicity such as 'Chineseness' as the ultimate signified area.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

Following Rey Chow's invitation to look at discursive strategies of 'writing diaspora', my article shifts from the autobiographical genre of Asian American women to a 'third' space, to a different poetic form. Naturally, the expression is here used quite differently from the political notion of 'Third World', that often implies a hierarchy of countries, or, in the best cases, a form of political solidarity. The notion of 'third space' that I employ comes from a critical lineage that emerged in the early eighties in Latin America, where the idea of a *Third Cinema* began to develop. A few years later, the post-colonial art journal *Third Text* began to be published. In 1989, a special issue of the British *Framework* addressed the question of "Third Scenario: Theory and the Politics of Location", in an intense and original dialogue among Stuart Hall, Isaac Julien and others.<sup>4</sup> We should also not forget the important contribution by Jim Pines and Paul Willemen in their *Questions of Third Cinema*.<sup>5</sup> In addition to these theories, I will draw from the concept of 'third space' as defined by Stuart Hall and, later on, by Homi Bhabha:

[I]t is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance, ... the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation

<sup>1</sup> See Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 16.

<sup>4</sup> See Stuart Hall, "Theory and the Politics of Location", *Framework*, 5, 1989.

<sup>5</sup> See Jim Pines and Paul Willemen, *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: BFI, 1989).

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may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism and the diversity of cultures, but on the in-scription and articulation of culture's hybridity. ... It is worth noticing here that it is the 'inter' – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It is only by exploring this Third Space that we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 39.

My essay focuses on female examples of the poetic and political creative displacement of multiple forms of diasporic and non-hegemonic writing, in its refusal to carry the burden of any pre-defined and univocal identity. The experiments I hereby describe are particularly interesting because they escape both the autobiographical and the collective 'we', which often ignores difference in the narration of oppressed people. This is the context where Trinh T. Minh-ha complicates the history of western dualism between male and female forms of writing, so as to be able to conceptualize a 'third scenario' as a challenge to that logic that we often take for granted.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

### Visions of a 'Third Space'

Since the seventies, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha have developed unique forms of writing, which are neither literary nor purely visual. While their writings are interspersed with theory, they are not purely theoretical; similarly, when they deal with personal memories, they cannot be pragmatically reduced to biography. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha situate themselves in border zones by molding different materials into heterogeneous forms of art that incorporate film, calligraphy, and photography. These two post-colonial artists reflect on contemporary events and relay the colonial wars in East Asia, especially in terms of the forced migrations across the Pacific Ocean, and the violence of American twentieth-century imperialism.

The work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, in particular, deals with exile, the loss of family relationships, the implications of multi-lingualism, and the complex interplay between language and memory. Her diasporic sensibility appears in the constant refusal to privilege any particular form of art over another, in the incessant passage to and from her installation's screens, at the margins of her canvas, or in the spaces that mix images and words on the pages of her poetry books. As real and imaginary stories appear intermittently at the edges of history, her work values those female stories and multiple subjectivities that border on the invisible. It develops through the constant crossing of images, and the juxtaposition of languages and poetic genres. Her poetics investigates the empty spaces and the distances between these spaces where multiple voices re-member and dis-member their disrupted storytelling.

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's work cannot be addressed without considering biography. As a child, Cha – who was born in Pusan, Korea in 1951 – had to move to Hawaii where her family took refuge during the Korean War. In 1962, she settled in

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California, where she enrolled in a Catholic school, and learnt French. She studied film and art at the University of California, Berkeley and went to France in order to pursue her graduate studies. Two decades after her immigration in the US, before getting married and moving to New York in 1980, she briefly went back to Korea. In 1982, at the age of 31, Cha was tragically murdered. Her premature death was particularly felt in the art world of the time, because of the importance of her innovative experiments in film-making, installations and video-art. What was also striking was that her book *DICTEE*, which was published just before her death, touched upon the themes of death, loss, and memory, and dealt with the ‘erasure’ of female narratives, thus becoming the mourning space where the biographical traces of the artist and poet Cha were last visible and audible.

Against the background of the painful correspondence between the themes of her artistic pursuit and her sudden death, her life and her entire family history were deeply marked by exile. In the thirties, because of the Japanese invasion, her parents had to move from Korea to Manchuria. At the end of World War II, they went back to Korea, only to find out that their country, under the devastation of the Korean War, was divided and ruled by a dictatorship. In 1963, they left once and for all for the US. In Cha’s work, the recurrent subject of exile is illustrated by the blank pages and by the dismembered words of a fragmented poetics that conveys the arbitrary, forced and violent, nature of diaspora.

In her poem “Exilée Temps Morts”, written in French, Cha deconstructs the spelling of the word ‘exile’, hinting at poetic practices typical of earlier Dadaist and Surrealist experiments:

EXIL  
EXILE  
ILE  
E’  
E’ E.’<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, “Exilée Temps Morts”, in R. Williams, ed., *Hotel, Collection of Written Works by Visual Artists* (New York: Tanam Press, 1980), 113.

‘Exile’ begins in the obliteration of one’s origin; in the act of translation, a female human being is eroded and fragmented into pieces. The word “Exilée” is broken into three parts, revealing the hidden verb *to be* (“ilée” in French sounds like the third person present tense “il est”), and the presence of an island (in French, “île”), which, as a product of fragmentation, highlights the condition of isolation. The letters “E’ E’”, finally, reproduce the French form for female nouns: here, exile is gendered as a woman, as the isolated and exiled author Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

In 1980, Cha produced the video-installation entitled *Exilée*, combining images that were broadcasted on a film screen and, simultaneously, on a TV screen, which the artist placed in the middle of the film screen. At times, the film projects an image while the TV is off; at other times, the TV screen contains small images surrounded by the large black space of the film screen. A sense of dissonance between the two is conveyed by the different qualities of light emitted by the screens. In

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particular, the video behind the feeble glass screen is contrasted with the brighter light emanating by the film screen.

As Trinh T. Minh-ha subtly noted in an essay that pays homage to Cha, the material composition of the screen plays an important role in the artist's work, becoming one of its recurring symbolic elements.<sup>9</sup> Here, while the large and cyclical images are like clouds, the installation's final image shows an empty envelope covered in dust. Exile is evoked by the presence of small objects, casting long shadows on the screen. They are arbitrary things – a cup, a mat, a windowpane – that constitute one's memory and that express some of the sensations that Cha, as a child, must have experienced in her exile from Korea. The empty rooms and the light reflecting onto the empty surfaces create a striking distance from her personal memory, removing all subjective elements, and also displacing the subjects – the people, their portraits and their signatures – of autobiographical narration. The soundtrack, which consists of a recorded voice, shifts between the inside of the screen and its outside, by repeating the following sentences:

Twice, two times two  
One on top below another one  
There are many twos in the twohold.<sup>10</sup>

The voice, which does not express a direct comment on the images, repeats the dualistic relationship between the screens, as if to imply a multitude of doubles. As stated in a posthumous anthology, "Exilée Temps Morts" originates from Cha's first return trip to Korea in 1979, seventeen years after her departure.<sup>11</sup> The voyage back to Korea is characterised by the long duration of the flight, and by time-zone differences. The trauma of loss and displacement, and the distance between Cha and the place where she grew up is rendered by the repetition of time measurements:

Following daylight to the end  
of daylight

Ten hours twenty three minutes  
sixteen hours ahead of this time

Ten hours twenty three minutes  
sixteen hours ahead of this time

Ten hours twenty three minutes  
sixteen hours ahead of this time.<sup>12</sup>

Cha's poetics relies on the repetition of words, which appear and disappear in the sequences of the text, changing and breaking it. In her *DICTEE*, in her video *Vidéoème*, or in her *Commentaire* on cinema, writing is a way of interrupting and dividing; by making silence audible, the words create white and black spaces on the surface of the page. According to Constance Lewallen, Cha's written work is always also visual; her short sentences and her dramatic punctuation give her texts

<sup>9</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "White Spring", in Constance Lewallen, ed., *The Dream of the Audience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 42.

<sup>10</sup> Cha, "Exilée Temps Morts", 41.

<sup>11</sup> See Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcón, eds., *Writing Self, Writing Nation: a Collection of Essays on DICTEE by Theresa Cha* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha, *Exilée* (video), transcription of the audio track (1980).

<sup>13</sup> Lewallen C., ed., *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, 1951-1982* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 1.

an internal rhythm, which is repetitive, condensed and, at the same time, infinitely expanding. For the art critic, Cha's written work is "mail art, work on fabric and paper, photocopies, stencils".<sup>13</sup> An example of this kind of dispersed writing, in which the idea of blank space and pauses are central, can be found in *Audience Distant Relative*, the poem published in 1977 as a series of seven lithographies. Cha chose to leave the space of a white page after each written page:

From the very moment any voice is conceived whether  
physically realized or not  
manifested or not  
to the very moment (if & when) delivered

.....

echo

.....

the in-between-time: from when a sound is made  
to when it returns as an echo  
no one knows if it was heard,  
when it was heard  
when it would be heard  
if ever at all  
but it continues on and on and on  
maybe thousand years  
someone's memory

tale  
legend  
poem  
dream.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE* (Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1982), 12, 14, 16.

The graphic composition of the poem is marked by intervals and silences. The reader is invited to look at the distance between the words, those empty spaces or that "in-between time" appearing on the first line of the last page of the poem. It is also a reflection on the distance between the moment of the poem's conception, the moment of its enunciation, and the moment of its reception by a hypothetical audience in different space and time. In the distance between thought and its expression lie the traces of Cha's sense of memory – "someone's memory" – as a personal and collective story – "tale, legend, poem" – of a people in exile. There is an indefinite interval among the multiple words, the stories, and the distances that assemble their 'in-between' time. Each legend, poem, or dream can be echoed, found in a distant location, or become lost: "no one knows if it was heard, when it was heard, when it would be heard, if ever at all, but it continues on and on and on."<sup>15</sup> The speech act can fail, the narration can be manifested, or not – "heard or not" – but both stay always already suspended in their uncertain intervals.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

In general, the limit of the expression, be it vocal or graphic, is a central aspect of Cha's written and visual work. She stays at the point-zero of enunciation, describing

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the conditions of speech for those who live in translation, expressing themselves in the ‘other’ language imposed by colonialism or immigration. Cha uses fragments of different languages, leaving the ‘wound’ open, and showing the harshness of the passage among them. Lawrence Rinder argues that Cha positions her voice in a space of otherness *vis à vis* each language, using English as an acquired and manipulable medium.<sup>16</sup> This is one of the reasons why the reader stays suspended; Trinh T. Minh-ha wonderfully describes her sensations in front of Cha’s installation, “as if transported mid-flight by a feeling of both undefined loss and utter lightness”.<sup>17</sup>

The sense of loss, disorientation and lightness characterizes the most widely known book written by Cha, *DICTEE*. At the beginning of the introductory part of the text, she takes us to the trauma of being forcefully identified, as when the immigrant is obliged by the border authorities to answer the question “Who are you?”:

From a Far  
What nationality  
or kindred and relation  
what blood relation  
what ancestry  
what race generation  
what house clan tribe stock strain  
what breed sect gender denomination caste  
what stray ejection misplaced  
Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other  
Tombe de nues de naturalized  
what transplant to dispel upon.<sup>18</sup>

The poem enacts the repeated interrogation, questioning both the origin and the brutal necessity to define oneself univocally and clearly – by blood, tribe, caste, or gender. Towards the end of the poem, the questions shift towards a presence that appears to be out of place (or “misplaced”), ejected (as in “stray ejection”), like a denaturalized third element (“tertium quid”) or a “transplant” irreducible to any clearly defined identity. Yet, while the far away place – afar – is literally transformed into a geographic place of origin: “a Far”, the poetic lines become gradually longer, as if to accommodate otherness.

## The Loss of Names and Memories

In the work by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha the references to exile and obliviousness all involve the loss of names and languages. In a violent imposition that requires an answer, the stranger is asked to tell who s/he is. In truth, her answer can only reduce the complexity of her subjectivity to a univocal and short utterance: the name. This may have been so often translated that it transforms into something else, eliding memory, or accepting external attributes to attach to one’s self.

Migration and the loss of names are recurrent themes of Asian and other non-European diasporas. Chinese or Arabic characters, when translated into

<sup>16</sup> Lawrence Rinder, “Korea: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha”, in *The Dramaturgy of Style: Voice in Short Fiction* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986).

<sup>17</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, “White Spring”, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 20.

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western languages, must be recomposed into different sets of symbols; even more poignantly, the composition of a name in Asian characters is untranslatable into English, marking the deepest loss for the bearer of that name. Cha's work takes us to the originary moment when the loss of names takes place. The question "Who are you?" is first asked at border-crossing points, or at the end of a journey – in both cases, declaring one's origin coincides with one's name loss.

The name and the act of naming recur in many of Cha's writings. In the edited volume of poetry *Hotel*, the form and the content of her contribution are all inspired by immigration. Here, the form that the migrants have to fill in when they arrive at destination, already constitutes a sign of exile. The act of filling it in, simultaneously acknowledging what is left in the blanks, questions the entirety of one's life, scrutinized in one moment in its most familiar aspects. The name, which is so close to its bearer, is made uncertain, mispronounced, re-written, translated, and often erased. Inscribed on the form and expressed in the foreign language, the process of being renamed is the first experience of loss encountered by the immigrant. When Cha uses this everyday form of questioning as the material for her poetry, she gives us, as Trinh T. Minh-ha states, the exact feeling of "undefined loss and utter lightness":<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "White Spring", 33.

NAME - NOM  
SEX- SEXE  
BIRTHPLACE – LIEU DE NASSANCE  
BIRTHDATE – DATE DE NAISSANCE  
WIFE/HUSBAND – EPOUSE/ EPOUX  
X X X  
MINORS – ENFANT MINEURS  
X X X  
ISSUE DATE – DATE DE DELIVRANCE  
EXPIRES ON – EXPIRE LE

BEFORE NAME  
NO NAME  
NONE OTHER  
NONE OTHER THAN GIVEN  
LAST ABSENT FIRST  
NAME  
WITHOUT NAME  
A NO NAME  
NO NAME  
BETWEEN NAME  
NAMED.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Cha, "Exilée Temps Morts", 154.

Each line of this poem reminds the reader of how it feels to fill in the form or to have to fit within strictly defined categories: *last name, absent, given name, first name, other, none*. Its end is written in two lines – "between name" and "named" – that call attention to what is left of the subject when inscribed in the spaces between transcription and translation. The poem's last word – the lonely past tense "named"

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– hints at the process of being named according to an enforced act of definition  
– that is, what closes and flattens the person into ‘one’ word.

In *DICTEE*, probably her most experimental work, Cha comes back to the theme of naming and renaming, this time in relation to the Koreans’ renaming by the Japanese occupying army, when, in the Thirties, they had to adapt their names to the Japanese alphabet. This process of ‘translation’, which proves a recurrent colonialist policy, is evoked in all its brutality, even though the poem does not use any narrative or historical documentation:

Some door some night, some window lit some train some  
city some nation some peoples  
Re Named  
utterly by chance by luck by hazard otherwise.  
any door any night any window lit any train any city  
any nation any peoples some name any name to a  
given name.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 155.

These lines show the violence of colonization in its impact on the everyday life of a people, portraying how life can be moved and renamed, scattered and randomly cast on diasporic journeys. It could belong to the experiences of many other colonized nations, from the African countries whose borders were drawn on maps by the European generals in absolute randomness, to the Americas, when they were first ‘discovered’ and appropriated by the Spanish and the Portuguese, often, later on, renamed by the English and by other colonial powers. Memories, names of places and peoples became suppressed and amputated. This poem uses the techniques of cinematographic montage to convey the discontinuities existing in memory, together with the casual nature of the subconscious. At the end of another fragmented poem, titled “Temps Morts”, Cha connects visibility and memory, structured as a strange list:

Memory less image less  
Scratches rising to bare surface  
Incisions to lift incisions to heal.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Cha, “Exilée Temps Morts”, 85.

Memory is like a scratched surface, with scars and small rough pieces resisting the smooth act of forgetting and the flat and naked passing of time, that “temps mort” of immigration. The traces of the past interrupt the smooth linear trajectory: “scratches rising to bare surface”. This image is similarly evoked at the beginning of *DICTEE*. Unlike most books, here the first even page does not show any copyright information: it is a black page with graffiti in the middle, a scratched surface made of stone or plaster. Although the book does not explain what the graffiti means, or where it comes from, many would recognize it as a historical document of forced Korean labor in Japan. The small traces against the black undistinguished oblivion of memory are scratches suggesting strong emotions in historical contexts. In the cut lies the presence of a displaced people whose names do not make up history.



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Those names remain as traces in time, embodied by the graffiti; their persistence shows the desperation of the Korean workers, and, at the same time, it suggests that, in the space opened between the past and the future, the healing process might be taking place.

Memories are threads that run throughout *DICTEE*. They appear in fragmented semblance; yet, the intense moments they express can be connected across subjective stories, legends, myths, hagiographies, diaries and historical references. In the book, if memory functions visually, the process of transforming visuality into a written language is shown as a painful, violent and, ultimately, impossible effort. When it takes place in-between images and words, across languages, remembering can only be characterized by uncertainties, gaps, spaces and closures.

For Cha, it is the reason why autobiography is impossible: the narrating subject is lost in a multiplicity of voices that are diluted in space and time. The final notes of *DICTEE* partially clarify that Cha is referring to the autobiography of St. Thérèse of Lisieux and to the diaries written by her mother. Her writing reminds us of an experimental film script using montage and shifting languages to make the usually hidden conventions of style visible. In each story, the voice and the languages are mixed and eroded to the point where there are only traces of memory left – traces that are marked by gender.

*DICTEE* follows an uneven rhythm punctuated by breaks and peaks of intensity. At times, different voices are presented in an opaque interrelation, and it is unclear whether they belong to the same story or subject. The photos and the illustrations are not commented on, nor are they strictly related to the text. Presented as a simple exercise in repetition, the poem's complex structure relays the voices and the stories of mothers, daughters, muses, wives, and exiles. The title probably refers to the idea of dictation, a purely repetitive form of writing and a classic educational tool to impose discipline on the student, leaving no space for creativity. The goal is to reproduce exact sounds and words on paper, which is precisely what the exile or the migrant cannot do, as she is experiencing life, as Cha herself does, in multilingual spaces and multiple memory sites.

To read *DICTEE* is to enter an uncomfortable place, leaving expectations of genres and structures behind. It frustrates all needs for specific forms of analysis. The text appears unfinished; at times, it proves too abstract, and at other times it is too personal, with its montage of calligraphy, handwritten letters and worn-out photos. The fascination only begins when the viewpoint of the literary critic is abandoned, ensnared by the rhythm of the shifts and the pauses among the images, the words, calligraphy and the film script. Cha seeks to question the inherent usually-taken-for-granted structures of language, and the power they assume over the speaking subject. By pointing at what is usually left out, she is looking for a poetic space disorientating the simultaneity of forms. The artist writes of her own vision: "my video, my film and performance works are ... explorations of language structures inherent in written and spoken material, photographic and filmic images – the creation of new relationships and meanings in the simultaneity of these forms."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Cha quoted in Lewallen, *The Dream*, 9.

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The second section of *DICTEE* is dedicated to Calliope, the muse of epic poetry, and it opens with a photo of a Korean woman, Cha's mother. Her diaries are re-written by Cha, who uses the first person voice. The reader can easily be lost in the passages embodied by this subjective narration: the female voices are mixed with historical facts and myths; political rebels are confused with Christian martyrs and saints. Against the backdrop of the Japanese invasion, the stories of migration that shape Cha's family are reconnected to historical narrations:

Dear Mother,

4. 19. four nineteen, April 19<sup>th</sup>, eighteen years later. Nothing has changed. I speak in another tongue now, a second tongue, a foreign tongue. All this time we have been away. But nothing has changed. A stand still.

It is not 6.25. six twenty five. June 25<sup>th</sup> 1950. Not today. Not this day. There are no bombs as you had described them. They do not fall.

[excerpt from mother's diary]

... You knew it would not be in vain. The thirty six years of exile. Thirty six years multiplied by three hundred and sixty five days. The one day your country would be your own. This day did finally come. The Japanese were defeated in the world war and were making their descent back to their country. As soon as you heard you followed South, you carried not a single piece, not a photograph, nothing to evoke your memory.

*From another epic, another history. From the missing narrative. From the multitude of narratives. Missing. From the chronicles. For another telling for other recitations.*

Our destination is fixed on perpetual motion of search. Fixed in its perpetual exile, Here at my return in eighteen years, the war has not ended ... We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 80-81.

Writing shifts from personal narrations to letters, to the imagined dialogue with Cha's mother: 'you'. Different female voices compose a story of exile, with unfinished wars and conflicts, by pointing at two occasions of return: Cha's first return to Korea, and her mother's first return after being a refugee. Both women are guided by the colonial order, and both stories are outside official history as parts of a missing narrative. Memory and exile appear in fragments and repetitions. The story of Cha's immigration, after the Korean War and the partition, connects with the story of her mother, and both are tied to a young woman, Yu Guan Soon, the anti-Japanese resister who died in 1920 at age 17.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

*DICTEE* touches upon the mother/daughter relationship in multiple ways. It is a shifting of voices that come from the female subconscious, where people, places, languages, and personal memories are in dialogue. They create *another history*, outside the archives of official history. The continuity among the women's stories and the experienced pain and suffering is provided by the continuous shifts between the first, the second and the third person, that convey the voices of the mother, the daughter, and the third woman:

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Mother becomes more and more expansive for she is at once mother, her mother, her daughter, and the latter's same-others. Looking through the camera at Her, her sorrow and her endurance, is looking at a whole generation of Asian women, in their relation to silence and language. In dealing with the intimate and the autobiographical Cha does not need to claim the insider's position of truth .... Cha looks at her mother/herself *from the outside* – the way a camera gazes at its subject.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, in Lewallen, *The Dream*, 126.

After the encounter with Cha in the seventies, Trinh T. Minh-ha confesses that her *oeuvre* as a film-maker is inspired, both verbally and visually, by Cha's gift of "opaque transparency".<sup>27</sup> She remarks that Cha's writing is never concerned with defined, clear and transparent objects, but is always insisting on the passages, the traces and the ruins of a speaking subject:

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

Seen and void. Void of view.  
Inside outside. As if never.  
Seen for the first time  
It was, it was the past.  
One is deceived  
One was deceived of the view  
Outside inside stain glass. Opaque.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Cha, *DICTEE*, 126.

Cha's poetics is interested in the opacity of vision, placed in the proximity to the ruin, in the empty spaces, in the past, in the "uneven glass" that allows the contact between the inside and the outside, the matter emerging from the in-betweenness of two elements: silence and speech, light and darkness on the film screen, wake and dreamtime. Her work is concerned with the absence and presence of the female other. Trinh T. Minh-ha speaks of a 'dream':

It's a dream, one says waking up in silence, and now? One wonders whether one has just dreamt a silence or whether silence is the sound of the dream. The entire room brims with incandescent silence. ... Between reverie and resistance lies a familiar face: that of the Absent – the artist-poet who assumes the ancient role of both a medium and a magnetizer. To her falls the magical task of resurrecting voices and looks by letting shadows appear and speak in her folds. The maker-recipient is bound to dream in one and in multiplicity .... She makes her appearance here as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and she is many. I recognize her tone, the cuts, the wait, the twilight – halfway between night unearthing and day *re-veiling*. The two lights (not one, not two either) on which reason and analysis have nothing to say. I recognized that voice – plural and utterly singular. A blind voice walking barefoot into the hearth of (our) shadows. Through it, I hear, within a closer range of resonance, the voices of WoMen: mothers and foremothers of Korea, the historical voices of resistance.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "White Spring", 34.

<sup>30</sup> Cha's performance took place at Worth Ryder Gallery, University of California Berkeley, in 1975.

<sup>31</sup> Cha's synesthetic performance was part of a group performance titled *Life Mixing* and organized by Reese Williams at the Berkeley University Art Museum in 1976.

Trinh T. Minh-ha is describing Cha's 1975 performance piece called *A Ble Wail*,<sup>30</sup> commenting on her uniqueness as an absent poet, moving between light and dark, capable of evoking different voices, languages and media. She emphasizes Cha's twilight sensibility with her veils and shadows, describing her voice as blind and multiple (especially in reference to Cha's 1976 performance piece titled *Voix-Aveugle*).<sup>31</sup>

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She is conscious, however, of the limits of writing on Cha's "twilight, on which reason and analysis have nothing to say".<sup>32</sup> The silences and the shadows belong to multiple female voices, which don't intend to choose between any clearly marked historical past and the present, between the singular and the plural, the colonizer and the colonized. Being herself so close to the invention of the 'third space', Cha can see, as Trinh T. Minh-ha remarks, "the many twos in the twofold":<sup>33</sup>

The question constantly raised in our times concerns another kind of *twoness*. ... There are, as life dictates, many twos; each equipped with their sets of intervals, recesses and pauses. Many and one between(s). The third term, as I would call it, by which the creative potential of a new relationship is kept alive, between strategic nationalism and transnational political alliance.<sup>34</sup>

### An open conclusion

In the previous examples I have tried to illustrate how Theresa Hak Kyung Cha responds to the colonial desire for the Asian 'other', supported by the poetics of post-colonial visibility, as advocated by Trinh T. Minh-ha. In emphasizing vision, Trinh T. Minh-ha deals with the critical de-centering of realism, deconstructing the ethical and epistemological premises of the Western colonial canon of documenting and studying other cultures.

In the economy of my interpretation, both Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha exemplify a creative tension towards a 'third' political and cultural space, offering a disorienting experience to Western educated audiences, and to their clear expectations. In their work, they consciously avoid univocality by refusing to privilege 'one' dominant element. Paying attention to the constant passages between the inside and the outside, their visual compositions oscillate in a 'border zone' where their critical and poetic eye looks, in the shadow, at the points of passage between the female subject and history, the visible and the unheard, the real and the imaginary.

Their work resonates with the postcolonial theories of hybridity, 'in-between-ness' and third space, as proposed by Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha dislocate the stable forms of centers and peripheries, male and female, written and oral. They themselves live through the constant passage, translation, or migration, across identities and poetic languages. Rather than consolidating identities (female, Asian or artistic), they leave spaces open, expressing at the same time the manifold colonial experiences of translation and migration across different places and languages (Korean and Vietnamese as mother tongues, translated into French and English). These processes of multiple translations are called "border writings" by Chicana critic Gloria Anzaldúa,<sup>35</sup> in that they reconfigure the sense of a stable identity and a fixed language into the emergence of intervals, breaks and fragments.

The reflections that move Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha speak of cultural, historical and biographical multiple ruptures. Their body of writings,

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>33</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha quotes Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's poem "Exilée Temps Morts", 157.

<sup>34</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, "White Spring", 40.

<sup>35</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987).

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and their bodies in the process of writing, sustain the process of dispersing and rarefying the collective subject of the immigrant woman, who is, at the same time, present and absent in history, society and creativity. The voices that cross their work are never defined and marked by identity, then smudge all clear borders, and move in the vicinity of a female form of writing (*écriture féminine*), without ever being burdened by the ‘representation’ of Asia or of a ‘general’ Asian woman, only invented for the sake of nationalistic interests.

The work of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha is neither written nor simply visual or multi-lingual. Their work is located in a third poetic space where images do not complete or transcend the act of writing, but, rather, they stay in an infinite on-going process that reveals their own limits and expresses their otherness to language. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Trinh T. Minh-ha embrace a ‘third’ hybrid poetics capable of disorienting all pre-existing assumptions on where and how ‘the other’ should speak. Their work is situated at the edges, where things don’t end but, on the contrary, where ‘events’ begin.