I

For a writer whose most visible work, *Dictée,* brims with saints and martyrdom and the possibilities of productive anguish, it's fitting that this gathering of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's disparate uncollected writings—everything from artists' books to typewritten *disjecta membra*—should give off the refulgent glow of relics set against plain white cloth. Since there will be no new writing from the late author, every word counts. Indeed, for an artist so committed to permutations of language—To literally mincing words, teasing meanings from amputations, one character at a time—every *letter* counts. Is a crossed-out line or seeming typo in fact some intimation of wordplay, language on the verge of creative unraveling?

Cha was only thirty-one when she was murdered in New York on November 5, 1982, shortly before the publication of *Dictée*. From the very first edition, then, everyone encountering *Dictée* has incorporated this grim fact into the reading experience. Over a quarter century after the book's publication, that shadow has soaked into its very fibers. Every sentence is haunted by what is about to be.

Yet despite its somber tone, *Dictée* is not a tomb, but something that remains vividly alive: an explosion of high-wire techniques and wide-ranging influences, a feat of historical imagination, a multimedia display, an eloquent stutter. Recto and verso narratives interlock, the text of one page fitting erotically into the white space on the other. An anatomical illustration of the chest and throat is followed by a map of divided Korea. Language breaks down, starts up, transposes itself from French to English, becomes a deadpan grammar lesson. It ends near glossolalia. The epigraph is from Sappho, whose surviving work consists almost solely of fragments.

Those who have heeded *Dictée*'s complicated call will find much to savor in the writings collected here: Cha's adventurous spirit is present in even the least of these works, a breath of a bygone avant-garde that still hits its mark with astonishing frequency. But *Exilée/Temps Morts: Selected Works* isn't only for completists and converts. Even readers unacquainted with *Dictée* will be rewarded with an unusual story—one as gripping as anything in Cha's most famous and fully realized work.

II

In one of the untitled selections that make up part 3 of this collection, "i have time" (pp. 00–000), Cha writes: "this is a book. i have an excuse. any excuse. all excuses, this is a book. its length, its content, fiction or no fiction, is true." When we write to ourselves—diaries, notes—we confess with an intensity otherwise hard to access. We spin world-shaking schemes, sketch the first lines of impossible books, revel in delusions of grandeur that we helplessly multiply. Continuity, even logic, is optional. We are free to contradict ourselves. Around two years later, Cha would write: "in delirium it's fiction. its fiction / from left hand corner to the right hand corner, from left to right." (p. 000) Has the antecedent changed? It doesn't matter. Even an author of many books only ever writes one book.

This (momentary) siding with fiction comes from an untitled typewritten page beginning "writing conscious-unconsciously" (p. 000), a good description of Cha's modus operandi for the fugitive pieces of part 3. The texts are restless, cacophonous, melodious, occasionally oppressive, and fascinating. They exist in a liminal state, between raw wordage and cohesive poetry, solipsistic auto-reportage and inspired juxtaposition. "[T]he sins documented and erased the constant tides of recording and erasing," she writes in "i have time," as if in thrall to such inchoate productivity, a little anxious at the prospect of ceaseless verbiage. These writings are many things: stopgap measures; a musician's obsessive tuning; the shadow output that every artist generates, draws secret sustenance from, and risks vanishing into.

The writer of "i have time" makes cryptic pronouncements, fashions and abandons odd lists, and eventually creates a character of sorts (a maid) that stirs enough interest as a potential narrative that Cha appends a handwritten note, fleshing out a possible scenario. There is a "scattered alchemy" to her cataloguing of household materials, which she wryly follows with "recipe for salade niçoise." Someone (a man?) scolds her: "all the years you spent here all the literature courses you studied is this what they taught you i can't understand a thing my dictionary has no translation of this."

The tension sends the reader backward, fruitlessly searching for the glimmer of a narrative thread, anything about this rebuking voice. But Cha, or the artist figure implicit in the writing, asserts herself with superhuman might: "this is the essay this is the fiction this is the poetry this is the novel this is the writing you have been waiting for." These pages were all started simply to fill a gap in the day ("i have time," the stumbling admission in "fly by night" that

"i wanted to wrtie *[sic]* write something before i become too sleep y" [p. 000]). But lines like this one slice through the insomniac murk, and suddenly not just a stretch of jagged typewritten coastline, but the whole strange realm of Cha's oeuvre bears a fresh motto. This is the writing we have been waiting for.

III

Exilée and *Temps Morts* (pp. 000–000) first appeared, together, in the anthology *HOTEL*, published in 1980 by the New York-based Tanam Press. Boxed before the ink was dry, the copies of *HOTEL* stuck together; nearly three decades later, separating one for further study requires tearing it from the pack, unavoidably damaging the glossy cover. A palimpsest of the contents printed on the back now mars the front; a bold *H* or *L* from the front finds itself transferred on the back. The book looks like the sides of those ancient buildings in New York that a nearby demolition will suddenly expose, on which traces of old painted advertisements linger, ghost texts. In other words, the perfect cover to house a work by Cha.

Exilée, *Temps Morts*: These titles represent distinct works, but their adjoining suites in *HOTEL* suggest that we read the titles together. For Cha, the condition of exile *is* dead time (*temps morts*), however fertile it may prove for creative work (Joyce's credo: silence, cunning, exile). As with *Dictée,* the title itself performs an initial alienation—French instead of English, which conjures Cha's more primal exchange, English instead of Korean.

Thus one might expect a dry run of *Dictée*'s themes and methods, yet *Exilée/Temps Morts* (as we shall call it) is no mere sketch, but a fully formed triumph, an echo chamber aerated with a subtle stream of laughing gas. Page-spanning *X*'s appear in *Exilée*, but that's as elaborate as the graphics get; everything else is text and white space. On this smaller canvas, without *Dictée*'s intricate architecture and visual apparatus, the words take center stage. Cha's lines achieve a quiet grace—

meanwhile
it might be time for at least one light
in this three mat room

or clatter into compelling repetitions and mutations—

take are taking took have taken have been taking
have had been taking had taken will take will have
been taking will have taken will have had taken.

There is more humor in *Exilée/Temps Morts* than in the entirety of *Dictée*: "she is asked with enthusiasm / who is being exiled that is the title what does / it mean who are you." Even as the text turns on itself, Cha is able to play the interrogation for a laugh as well. One of several seemingly found texts is a business letter (beginning "Dear Colleague"), which gassily expounds on the concept of "future shock" before dissolving into a hilarious traffic jam of verb tenses. A menu (apparently from her trip, that year, to Japan) is reproduced with this header:

YESTERDAY WAS WEDNESDAY
TODAY IS THURSDAY
TOMORROW WILL BE FRIDAY

This language-lesson formulation, repeated across a week, accrues shades of homesickness and desperation, like hotly telegraphed panic signals of someone counting the days till freedom.

Time and again her words self-destruct, sentences dissolving to expose the very skeleton of language, the limit of sense: "noun verb adjective article" at one point, shards of a Dick and Jane primer at another. "[N]o other cure none other than words," Cha writes. A cure for what? It is a curious cure, involving constant breakdown—but perhaps the speaker or writer is inoculating herself with the base elements of language against some bigger breakdown, looming off the mind's horizon.

IV

Of the numerous acute themes and settings in *Exilee/Temps Morts*—you couldn't call them plots or scenes—the most poignant involves an obsessive calculation of the time difference between the West Coast of the United States and Korea. The telephone operator

tells me it is sixteen hours
sixteen hours from here a head

ahead of this time she says, if it is four thirty
p. m. here, it is eight thirty a. m. there.

A painstaking calculation follows, so that "seven thirty" is translated, hour by hour, to the Korean hour of eleven thirty. Korea is always in the future. The irony is that for Cha, Korea is the past, *her* past.

If *Exilée/Temps Morts* is a triumph, the remnants of *White Dust from Mongolia* (pp. 000–000) represent a crucial defeat. Cha planned for *White Dust* to be filmed in Korea, where (in 1979, when she began work on the project) she had been only once since emigrating to the United States in 1963. The film would have two narratives and three voices, a textured polyphony akin to that of her written pieces. Surviving storyboards and footage feature public spaces, trains, close-ups of hands. The nameless, amnesiac female character functions as a catchall metaphor. Typewritten texts related to *White Dust* exhibit Cha's trademark tension between the impossibility of language ("could not bear to say [. . .] without a single sound without a single voice") and its inevitable unleashing ("by train going to school by train through dark tunnels the smoke comes in if the window is not closed everyone screams when the tunnel comes"). But Cha's lacuna-filled approach to the past—to *her* past—could not withstand an actual encounter with that past, as we shall see.

Where does exile end and life begin? Cha's unusually long academic stint (resulting in two bachelor's degrees and two master's degrees) reflected a devotion to art making in various mediums. But if life in Berkeley and briefly New York was fecund, it was also a dead time. As abstract as much of her description of *White Dust* sounds, she stressed (in a 1981 grant application to the National Endowment for the Arts) that the film would be about "my return to the time and space that was once left, that only existed in memory until the void between the two separate spaces and time *[sic]* are able to be filled, by the actual return to the place, in this case, to Korea, which I have left 17 years ago."[1]

rejustified from —here to correct widow, ok? AW/ICS

In an Eisner Award application she submitted the same year for continuation of work on *White Dust,* she stated, "My work, until now [. . .] has been a series of metaphors, for this return."[2] Clearly, the metaphors were in place *before* she left for Korea they were in line with what we know of her other work. Rather than landing in Korea and seeing how it might inspire her, Cha had mapped out the film beforehand.

She came to Seoul in the midst of a particularly turbulent phase of Korea's reliably turbulent twentieth-century history. Her film project was to be *about* history—*White Dust*'s anonymous protagonist would be a metaphor, Cha wrote, for "nation, a historical condition"[3]—but came to a halt *because* of history, because of events that she couldn't have predicted.

Put another way: Cha's rather abstract, dream-state conception of history ran up against, was broken by, *real* history: the violence of modern Korea. President Park Chung Hee had been assassinated in October 1979; the following spring saw the bloody Kwangju uprising, in which civilian opposition to Park's successor, former general Chun Doo Hwan, was brutally suppressed. There was unrest in the streets, tension everywhere. In a grand irony, Cha and her brother were harassed as they tried to work on their film, possibly suspected of being North Korean spies. Perhaps *this* should have become the topic of her film; instead, the chaotic conditions would doom the production. The abandoned film would become an unfinished book, but it doesn't appear that she made any concessions to the reality of what she had witnessed in Korea.

"She is without a Past," Cha remarks about her character in a description of *White Dust*, written white she still planned to make this film in Korea—that is, in her past. The problem with amnesia is that it's so rare as to be exotic; it can give ludicrous power to a mystery story or thriller, but otherwise risks sinking a work into fussy abstraction. How did Cha intend the "void" to be filled? The grievances of Korea find a place in *Dictée*—Cha reproduces a pathetically polished 1905 letter from Syngman Rhee (future first president of South Korea) to Franklin Delano Roosevelt—but there were more immediate rumblings that, living in America, Cha didn't seem to register. Hoping to make a film along the lines of her artfully assembled history, Cha collided with the actual history that surrounded her as soon as she set foot in Seoul. The country had not fossilized after she left in the 1960s. It was not waiting for her writing.

White is a funerary color in Korea; death suffuses *White Dust from Mongolia*, even in its incomplete state. Or you could say that it exists *in toto*: that this project in fact lives in its rubble, exists in its very dust, the dust of failure—something perhaps Cha sensed even as she tried repeatedly to resurrect it. Something perhaps she had known the moment she came up with the title.

1 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Summary of Work, Individual Grant Application, National Endowment for the Arts, 1981, UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Archive.
2 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Personal Statement and Outline of Independent Postdoctoral Project, submitted for Chancellor's Postdoctoral Fellowship, UC Berkeley, 1979, Cha Archive.
3 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, film scenario for *White Dust from Mongolia,* 1980, Cha Archive.