Modern Warfare

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter examines the legacy of high modernism in the work of avant-garde Asian American artists at the end of the 20th century. Returning to a history of transpacific alliances in their work, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim explore the costs of such ties in formal terms by newly invoking modernist forms. This chapter argues that their experimental poetry dissects modernist aesthetics in order to interrogate U.S.-East Asian alliances.

Keywords: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Dictee, Myung Mi Kim, avant-garde poetry, Korean American literature
Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) presents Wittman Ah Sing, a Chinese American artist, in a freewheeling tale set in 1960s San Francisco. Named after the American bard, his last name not only sounds like the repeated “I sing” of Whitman’s ringing lines but reminds us of Ah Sin, Bret Harte’s 1870 “The Heathen Chinee”: both halves of his name bear their translations between East and West. Wittman explains the peculiarity of his last name by acknowledging that “I’m one of the American Ah Sings. Probably there are no Ah Sings in China. You may laugh behind my family’s back, that we keep the Ah and think it means something. I know it’s just a sound. A vocative that goes in front of everyone’s names” (307). The mistake of the vocative case makes for a name that is an address, and Wittman is a champion talker and performer with bardic aspirations. *Tripmaster Monkey* depicts a narrative arc from foreign Chineseness to American belonging: the novel opens with Wittman on a walk in the park in which he crosses paths with a Chinese family he disdains—“whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats in public. Didn’t know how to walk together” (5)—and concludes with the staging of a grand and messy play which Wittman dubs “The Journey In the West,” a revision of a Chinese epic for his American present. In a long soliloquy after the performance, Wittman cries, “There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West” (308).

Wittman proclaims his American lineage by reciting a poem by his namesake:

> Facing west from California’s shores,  
> Inquiring, tireless, seeking what is yet unfound,  
> I, a child, very old, over waves, towards the house of maternity, the land of migrations, look afar  
> Look off the shores of my Western sea, the circle almost circled...(162)¹
To hear Whitman's poem in Wittman's voice transforms it: “the house of maternity” is made literal. Wittman's recitation, however, stops short of (p.123) the complete poem; he is interrupted by his bride-to-be Taña, who says, “Wittman.” She is calling out to him, but she also inadvertently cites the poet: we may read her doubled call as an identification of both Wittman and Whitman. The scene ends with a spontaneous marriage between Wittman and Taña, a vision of blonde, California beauty—thus staging Fenollosa's vision of “The Union of East and West”—which seals Wittman's claim to Whitman. In Leaves of Grass, “Facing West from California's Shores” goes on to describe global wanderings, and the poem concludes with two lines in parentheses:

(But where is what I started for so long ago?  
And why is it yet unfound?) (111)

These lines express the tireless inquiry of the poem's second line, but on their own, they sound especially bewildered: the purpose is lost, and the speaker's powers of discovery have faded. I read Taña's repeated call to Wittman as a replacement for Whitman's uncertain ending; in excising and replacing these lines, Tripmaster Monkey completes Whitman's near-circle by imagining a new American bard whose “house of maternity” resides far across the Pacific but whose claim to America is sealed by an American alliance.

Tripmaster Monkey traces a genealogy from Whitman to the Beats and suggests that Wittman may take this lineage further: “Gary Snyder had gone to Japan to meditate for years, and could spend five minutes in the same room with his mother. Beat his record“ (182). The text lightheartedly suggests that Snyder's religious study served to reunite him with his mother, and Wittman aims to “beat” Snyder not at meditating but at enduring his parentage. The trouble for Wittman is the “house of maternity,” which risks undermining his artistic claims. He expresses this anxiety as a hindrance to his Beat desires:
Find the open mikes, and sing. Stand in doorways of auditoriums where known poets are on platform, and hand-deliver dittos of your own outcast poetry; Richard Brautigan did that. And Bob Kaufman on megaphone in front of the St. Francis Hotel. Bring the poems back to the East Bay to read to Jack Spicer at Robbie’s, the F.O.B. cafeteria men acting like they don’t notice you. (51)

Wittman’s dreams are marred by the “F.O.B. cafeteria men” who trump his aspirations of literary celebrity; the hard separation between Beat alliance and the Chinese workers threatens Wittman’s artistic pursuits. By the end of the novel, however, Wittman condemns a famous Beat for mistaking him for one of these “cafeteria men”:

Once when I was in high school, I met one of the great American Beat writers—I’m not saying which one because of protecting his reputation. He’s the one who looks like two of the lohats, (p.124) beard and eyebrows all over the place. He was standing next to me during a break at the Howl trial. I told him I wanted to be a playwright. I was a kid playwright who could’ve used a guru. While he was shaking my hand, he said, “What’s a good Chinese restaurant around here?” I tell you, my feelings were hurt bad. Here was a poet, he’s got right politics, anti-war, anti-segregation, he writes good, riding all over America making up words for it, but on me he turned trite. Watch out for him, he’s giving out a fake North Beach. He doesn’t know his Chinatown, he doesn’t know his North Beach. (318)

Wittman’s contradictory impulses to protect and indict this Beat celebrity express the complexity of a Beat legacy for the Chinese American artist. He reveals a key weakness of the counterculture: “right politics” is no guard against cultural appropriation. But in the absence of a Beat guru, Wittman has fashioned his own radical art: he opens the classic Chinese epic and packs it with everyone he has ever met. In the novel’s finale, Kingston brings together every character in the book—they all have parts in Wittman’s play. Tripmaster Monkey thus suggests a model of radical inclusion for Asian American literature.
Wittman's caution to the crowd—“Watch out for him, he's giving out a fake North Beach”—directly alludes to Kingston's most vocal enemy, Frank Chin. Chin's ninety-two-page diatribe against “fake” Asian Americans in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* singled out Kingston for falsifying Chinese myths, which—according to Chin—“are, by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths” (29). Chin's grounds for attack are ultimately Kingston's failed “cultural memory,” which blends together East and West. As a result, Kingston is tainted with Orientalism, and Chin excoriates Kingston for her “white racist genius” (34); he directs his fiercest invective at Asian American writers who cross the transpacific bridges of American Orientalism. Chin's aesthetics advocated cross-cultural alliances only within the United States and with sanctioned cultural entities. The ethnic nationalist stance relied on exclusion, and Chin's essay flatly stated his qualifications for entry into the movement: one had to be a “real” Asian American and not an American Orientalist, and he devoted pages and pages to identifying fakery.
Chin and Kingston stand as competing figureheads for Asian American literature, but with *Tripmaster Monkey* Kingston made public record of her victory in the battle. Wittman possesses a clear resemblance to Frank Chin: as Patricia Chu notes in her reading of the novel, Kingston notably includes a “parody of Chin's attacks on Kingston” (125). Yet *Tripmaster Monkey* is strikingly free of acrimony, and Kingston's narrator demonstrates an affection for her protagonist. Indeed, the last lines of the text show us a teasing, motherly interest: “Dear American monkey, don’t (p.125) be afraid. Here, let us tweak your ear, and kiss your other ear” (340). Kingston's novel violates Chin's standards by modifying a Chinese epic, and she also threw in Chin himself as a figure who could be altered through the process of her writing. In a *MELUS* interview with Marilyn Chin, Kingston describes *Tripmaster Monkey*’s narrative as “a novel in which Wittman grows up to be a socially responsible, and effective, and good man,” concluding: “If I can write such a novel, then it means that I will have made Holden Caulfield grow up; I would have made Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer grow up” (73). In likening Wittman to these hallmarks of the American canon, Kingston has turned Frank Chin into an American boy, thus converting the howl of the ethnic nationalists into a childish outburst. Kingston domesticated Wittman Ah Sing and cast ethnic nationalism as a phase to outgrow.
Kingston and Chin are exact contemporaries: both born in 1940, they attended Berkeley, where each was deeply influenced by the radical movements that swept the campus. Both writers have staked significant claims on their groundbreaking work: one created a new canon, but the other radically expanded the American canon. For each artist, however, the other presents a throwback: for Chin, Kingston's work refers to the Orientalism that sparked his literary countermovement, but Kingston's Wittman Ah Sing is locked into the 1960s. These two founders of Asian American literature thus present competing teleologies: from racism to antiracism on one hand, and from exclusion to inclusion on the other. Their differing principles of exclusion and inclusion posed varying aesthetic challenges: the literary experiments of the ethnic nationalists were driven by a quest for new forms to express their new voice; but for those on the inclusive end, folding in a mainstream literary inheritance newly invoked American Orientalism. The problem of transpacific alliances lies behind both ideologies of Asian American literature—one presents a turn away, but the other returns to long-standing bridges across the Pacific.

Kingston unsealed the literary past that ethnic nationalists rejected: she has foregrounded her debt to high modernism and framed her work as a continuation of this lineage. Kingston's work queries the links between her American existence and a distant Asia, and this chapter considers Asian American poets in the late twentieth century who negotiate these ties. Asian American poetry makes the difficult legacy of American Orientalism especially visible because of the particular significance of transpacific ties in twentieth-century American poetry. The formal traces of high modernism are starkly visible in Asian American poetry, and I examine two Asian American poets who experiment with this inheritance: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim. Cha's epic Dictée reshaped the Asian American literary canon by destabilizing voice and imagining a speaker at the mercy of history and a literary past, and Kim's work follows Cha in problematizing speech itself for the Asian American artist. Both artists invoke a long history of political and military alliances between the United States and East Asia in poetic forms which themselves bear the traces of American Orientalism.

Warrior Poets
Of course, it was Kingston's groundbreaking first book, *The Woman Warrior*, published in 1976—two years after *Aiiieeeee!*—that put her on the literary map. First-person accounts by Asian immigrants and their children were nothing new, but *The Woman Warrior* took apart the genre of the memoir in fractured tales overrun with myths. *The Woman Warrior* is often read as an Asian American Bildungsroman, but the text in fact presents two generations in different episodes of mother and daughter.\(^8\) The mother's story describes a westward movement, but the daughter journeys into a China of memory and fantasy. The text's episodic structure suggests the form of the epic: the mother's Odyssey against Maxine's Telemachy. The epic is a story of homecoming, and Kingston's twist on the formula is to require the daughter to make an excursion into her mother's past. Kingston's young heroine thus crosses an imagined bridge across the Pacific, harking back to the alliances of American Orientalism.

Kingston's affinity with modernist Orientalism has been attacked, as in David Leiwei Li's critique of Kingston's use of Chinese writing in *The Woman Warrior* as a quotation of Ezra Pound, "whose calculated modernist experimentation with poetic and ideographic Chinese might have given Kingston's image of self an aesthetic legitimacy," in which Li concludes that her work is a "blurring of two discourses, American orientalist and Chinese American" ("The Production of Chinese American Tradition" 327). Yet Kingston's connection to modernism goes much deeper: *The Woman Warrior* taps into the epic tradition, a genre revitalized by modernism, and she employs a "mythical method," to cite Eliot's appraisal of *Ulysses*, in which she layers contemporary experience onto a mythic pattern.\(^9\) The opening prophecy of the text, with its blending of memory, history, and fable in the tale of her nameless aunt, launches into an epic mode; Kingston's "mythical method" is to imagine a mythic China and inject this fantasy into a silenced American existence.
*The Woman Warrior* installed itself into the American canon by imaginatively reconsidering forms and themes enshrined by modernism. The epic sweep of her text made it expansive enough to provide a foundation for Asian American literature, and its formal difficulty facilitated its inclusion on college syllabi because it was amenable to unpacking in the classroom. *The Woman Warrior* is a staple of the student diet, and its multiple layers and textures continue to make it a formidable object of study. This predilection for formal difficulty can be traced back (p.127) to literary modernism, which advocated a cultural renewal in textual adventures that simultaneously destabilized and newly adhered to formal conventions. Translated into the terms of Asian American literature, the kind of difficulty showcased by high modernism neatly folded into the Kingston side of the canon debate. A blunt division between politics and aesthetics is never easy to sustain, yet this ideological rift lingers in discussions of Asian American poetics in particular because of the problem of high modernism. Poetry was a secondary act for both sides of the debate—the main battle was between fiction and autobiography—but poetic discourse assumes primary importance when we reconsider literary modernism as a past for Asian American literature.
We can chart theorizations of Asian American poetry from Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s important essay “Reconstructing Asian-American Poetry: A Case for Ethnopoetics” (1987), which argues for “ethnocentered reading” (51). Lim excoriated Orientalist ornament, and she ultimately made a structural argument, reading three different levels of “ethnopoetics” in Asian American poetry (53). Her essay revealed the range of textures and nuances possible in a poetics that is engaged with questions of ethnicity. By 1992, however, George Uba suggested a new turn for poets in a postactivist era, who “have been thrust back on their sense of an individual self” and back “toward European-American poetics” (“Versions of Identity” 35). In a 1995 essay, David Mura similarly argued that “Asian American poets need to be read against the backdrop of a multiplicity of contexts” (181) in order to overcome a problematic tendency “to view Asian American poetry solely from a social/historical model” (172). A less nuanced view is evident in Garrett Hongo’s introduction to The Open Boat (1993), his anthology of Asian American poetry, in which he positioned himself against ethnic nationalism, criticizing Aiiieeeee!’s “strongly worded and hectoring introduction” (xxvi) and stating instead that “being doctrinaire is not a requirement for inclusion in this anthology” (xxxvii).
The terms of this debate are entirely recognizable; the only surprise is that they unfolded twenty years after *Aiiieeeee!* and *The Woman Warrior*. If these issues appear late, it is in large part because poetry itself dropped out of Asian American literature, a fact made evident in both of the foundational texts of the canon, in which poetry plays no part. In her 1996 overview “Reading Asian American Poetry,” Juliana Chang opens with the “apparent turn away from poetry toward prose” in the 1970s and 1980s (81). In pitching poetics as itself a marginalized art within minority literature, Chang discovers a way of reading a range of Asian American poets without succumbing to the standard divide. Instead, she aims “to destabilize readings of multicultural literature as simple instantiation of social experience or reflection of fixed cultures” (90). Chang secures a single, albeit “rough and uneven terrain” for Asian American poetry by uncovering “histories of psychic or material violence” (94): in short, Asian American poetry as a whole can be read as a mode of resistance to a dominant culture that would conceal such violence. We can see a mirror image of this claim in Sunn Shelley Wong’s 2001 “Sizing Up Asian American Poetry,” in which she reconsiders “a binary scheme that rhetorically lines up activist poetry with ‘raw energy’ and ‘shock tactics’ and postactivist poetry with ‘sophistication’ and ‘finess[e]’” because this formulation “lends itself to being read as a recapitulation of the politics-aesthetics divide, with the second term being privileged as a developmental end point” (293). Wong’s essay suggests a shared condition of Asian American poetry: “we may characterize the Asian American poet’s existence in the English language as one of estrangement” (301). This sense of alienation leads to multiple kinds of difficulty, which Wong theorizes structurally; through an elaboration of difficulty, Wong discovers a way of discussing activist and postactivist poetry without privileging either.
Chang and Wong provide significant arguments for considering Asian American poetry as a field: for Chang, Asian American poetry unveils obscured histories; for Wong, linguistic estrangement. Yet in foregrounding cultural resistance on the one hand, and difficulty on the other, these theorizations of poetry themselves do not escape alignment with the politics-aesthetics divide that both seek to overcome. This theoretical recapitulation reveals the potency and continuing significance of the overarching debate: Asian American literature as a whole has not transcended its initial conundrum of exclusion versus inclusion. If we read the summaries by Chang and Wong more narrowly within these terms, we may see how important each kind of argument is to the field: a resistant mode creates the field; an account of differing formal strategies expands it. Wong’s analysis reveals the key problem of the “politics-aesthetics divide”: aesthetics is “privileged as developmental end point,” but politics has never gone away and a resistant mode seems only more pressing at the beginning of the twenty-first century. This debate within Asian American studies thus suffers from a larger problem of modern literature, in which the prefix post is repeatedly affixed only to discover an illusory temporality: postactivism proceeds alongside activism.

In his discussion of opacity and difficulty in Asian American poetry, Brian Kim Stefans rejects a timeline altogether:

What becomes clear in reading this nonlinear history of Asian American poetics is that many of the writers appear to have reached this element of their poetics without having had much communication with each other, at least not in the manner that many poetry movements—from imagism to the Umbra poets—have in the past. (44)
Because Stefans does not subscribe to a unifying term for Asian American poetry, the category of Asian American poetry cannot be sustained, and (p.129) his essay presents a series of illuminating readings without attempting to bind them together. Stefans thus demonstrates the fate of not positi-ting a shared sensibility or problem: his essay eludes the recuperation of the politics-aesthetics divide, but the price is the field itself. He concludes his essay by reasoning that Asian American poets ‘are forced into a consideration of the Western literary tradition, especially the ‘avant-garde,’ in a peculiar way because of a vague sense of membership in a racially defined community that often is not loyal to the various binaries mentioned earlier in this essay” (72). Hence, in the absence of a coherent Asian American poetry, the “Western literary tradition” reappears. Stefans’s argument presents a logical endpoint for a poetics that has never been fully incorporated into the Asian American movement: his essay is not part of a collection on Asian American or minority literature but in a book on avant-garde poetics.

If we give up on the category of Asian American poetry as anything more than “a vague sense of membership in a racially defined community,” this poetry thus follows American poetry generally—and, more specifically for the poetry Stefans examines, high modernism. Against this end, we may read Chang’s and Wong’s analyses of resistance and difficulty as crucial attempts to condition the experiments of Asian American poetry within a cultural frame. In the absence of such a frame, modernism appears unmediated by the major cultural revolution of the 1970s, the intervention which unmasked the Orientalism of high modernism. Asian American poetry is missing a past precisely because modernism ultimately troubles the existence of Asian American poetry itself. At the crux of this problem, however, a single text has emerged seemingly to tackle this dilemma of Asian American poetry: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictée*. Nearly every scholarly account of Asian American poetry in the last decade—including, of course, the above-cited articles—features Cha’s text as a kind of savior because *Dictée* demonstrates that it is possible to write poetry that looks like a modernist epic without succumbing to Orientalism.
Scholars of Cha's text have noted its formal similarities to the modernist long poem. In her essay “Unnaming the Same,” Sunn Shelley Wong mentions this inheritance in a note, but she does so with some qualifications:

In invoking *The Cantos* and a tradition of the American long poem that would also include Williams's *Paterson* and Olson's *The Maximus Poems*, I am not suggesting that *Dictée* would fit readily within that tradition. While *Dictée* maintains certain formal resemblances to the long poem, it is also marked by divergences, perhaps most notably in its refusal of the presence and prerogatives of a single controlling authority. (138–139)

The *Cantos* are famous for their array of inclusions, and Cha's newly imagined epic goes one further than Pound's grab bag of letters, conversations, and histories: she shows us the documents themselves, ranging from letters written in longhand to photographs and film stills. Cha's inclusions visibly demonstrate their sources instead of relying on the filter of a single voice, and Wong reads *Dictée* as an indictment of modernist aesthetics. Wong theorizes her discomfort with this literary inheritance by naming Cha's technique a “poetics of cleaving” (112) in which the text simultaneously breaks apart as it binds together, and she suggests that this strategy pits the conventions of modern epic against the lyric: Cha “draws forward both a lyric and an epic tradition of poetry” in order “to cast them into mutual conflict” (106). Identifying a dialectical opposition between epic and lyric produces a critique of “the ideological dimension of genre” (106)—yet Cha's invocation of the modernist epic recalls the plasticity of the form.
Wong's reading is characteristic of academic accounts of *Dictée*, which have balked at ascribing a modernist inheritance to the text, a fact about scholarship in ethnic literature that Anne Anlin Cheng puzzles over; Cheng, like Wong, writes that “Cha's ‘novel’ has more in common with poetic experimental writing dating back to the 1970s (Charles Olson, Robert Duncan)” (140), and she goes farther back in literary history to remind us that “the whole of twentieth-century literature, from Pound's first thirty cantos on, has been an assault on ideological narratives and the certitude of historical narration” (150). Yet Cheng goes on to note that “such awareness seems to almost wholly disappear when it comes to reading ethnic literature.” Cheng's analysis argues that to refer to a literary past is to reopen it. Against the “certitude of narration,” then, I think we may reframe Wong's discussion of Cha's use of lyric and epic modes: Cha revises both lyric and epic in *Dictée*—but not for the purposes of destroying them. Her invocations of these modes remind us that they were never settled in the first place. The wonder of Cha's text is her creation of an aesthetic frame that keeps alive the many tensions that preoccupy her.
First published in 1982, *Dictée* was rescued from obscurity by Asian American scholars, thanks in large part to the 1994 publication of a collection of essays focused on Cha's text, entitled *Writing Self Writing Nation* and edited by Elaine H. Kim and Norma Alarcón. The title of the volume is particularly telling: it states that Cha's text writes both a self and a nation, and as a result *Dictée* has been read as a complicated expression of Asian American identity. Wong's essay “Unnaming the Same” closes the collection, and I believe we may apply Wong's valuable formulation of a “poetics of cleaving” to the self and nation of the volume's title. The specific lyric and epic invocations of the text work to disrupt received notions of self and nation; Cha revises the terms of lyric self and imagines this figure on an epic journey. We may turn to Cheng's illuminating reading of *Dictée* for a further elaboration of the difficulties of incorporating self into nation: Cheng demonstrates that "*Dictée* is not interested in identities, it is profoundly interested in the processes of identification" (141). Cheng reads the text as a cluster of melancholic attempts to fold the individual into a communal understanding, and this gap between self and nation is the rich territory that the text as a whole mines: *Dictée* is about a self facing a nation, working through the trauma of the encounter with the grim knowledge that the self cannot—indeed, in some cases, must not—be embraced within the larger order. We may read this kind of "cleaving" in terms of Cha's use of the modernist epic: she inhabits this form at the same time that she destabilizes it. In its formal strategies, *Dictée* has become the banner text for making high modernist aesthetics safe for minority literature; but its heterogeneous inclusions—especially its historical documents—ally Cha's text to a political aim. Cha's formal allegiance to modernism and transpacific crossings ultimately permits its lessons in history and politics. Through modernist experiment, she has discovered a singularly apposite mode—one shaped by alliances between the United States and East Asia—to tell a painful story of historical and political intimacies between East and West.

Reliving the Past
Dictée is an experimental epic comprising nine sections named after the Classical muses and shaped into a novena. Through its avant-garde strategies, the text weaves together different kinds of afflictions: individual somatic concerns, mythic plights, and political occupations. Cha has created an aesthetic framework which is both rigorously ordered and flexible enough to delve into a single body and survey a historical landscape. The central document of Dictée is a “Petition from the Koreans of Hawaii to President Roosevelt,” which warns of Korea's long occupation by Japan. Cha includes the entirety of the letter in Dictée's first section, “Clio/History.” The text of the document pleads for American assistance because, as it points out, “the clause in the treaty between the United States and Korea gives us a claim upon the United States for assistance, and this is the time when we need it most” (36). The petition describes the fateful deal struck between Japan and Korea in order to ward off Russian occupation and the belated realization that Japan would only be another occupying force, not a protector of Korean sovereignty. What is striking about this extraordinary document, dated July 12, 1905, is the way in which it underscores American involvement.

The letter is signed by P. K. Yoon and Syngman Rhee. Rhee went on to become Korea's leader, much later and heavily backed by the United States. Subsequent events proved the line “The United States has many interests in our country” (36) to be crucial: Rhee leveraged this plea on these interests, and, half a century later, strategic interests embroiled American military forces in Korea, ultimately hardening the division at the 38th parallel. By including this document, Cha reveals the long history of American involvement in Korea, and to cite a plea by Rhee is to plot a narrative of growing Western intervention which culminated for Rhee in a puppet government backed by the United States with himself installed at the helm. After his corrupt regime was overthrown in 1960, Rhee lived out the last five years of his life in the United States, returning to the nation which educated and groomed him to stand as its screen.
President Roosevelt was unmoved by this appeal against Japanese occupation—he considered Japanese imperial policy a way of countering Russia—and Cha refers to another poignant example of the perils of letter writing when she cites Carl Theodor Dreyer’s 1928 film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc,* which dramatizes Joan’s fateful signing of a treacherous letter which seals her execution. In fact, *Dictée* is littered with unsuccessful missives: from these letters fraught with historical significance to personal letters from Cha’s mother. The seventh section of the text, entitled “Thalia/Comedy,” includes two rather cryptic letters interspersed between different memories. The first letter, typed and addressed to “Mrs. Laura Claxton,” is a brief response to a misdirected letter, letting Mrs. Laura Claxton know that the Mr. Reardon she has written to has moved (142). The second, also addressed to Laura Claxton, is a very different kind of letter: written by a “friend” in an urgent and occasionally illegible hand, it informs Laura Claxton that her sister is dangerously ill and threatening suicide (146–148). These are old-fashioned letters (the first is dated 1915, the second 192–) directed at people with blandly American names, but the contents of the letters describe strange absences and illnesses, in which senders and addressees are curiously missing. These letters reveal an America dotted with missing persons and desperate appeals: Cha shows us letters without replies, and failed connections between sender and addressee have deadly consequences.

The consequences of the failed petition to Roosevelt direct us to the key division of the text: the 38th parallel, which Cha shows us on a map included in “Melpomene/Tragedy.” At the heart of the text lies a persistent rupture that refuses to be healed; from this central divide, *Dictée* shows us division in many different guises, and the text never suggests that division is something to be transcended. Cha uses this method in order to understand a riven nation: all of her aesthetic labors are in the service of revealing a fraught history. In “Clio/History,” she makes the history lesson apparent:

Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion.

(p.133)
To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion. (33)

Cha distinguishes between reliving and repeating history: *Dictée* relives history in a ritualized Catholic confession as a deliberate counter to repeating history. Cha is arguing for a kind of embodied remembering over the oblivion of repetition. From the petition, we can fast-forward through modern Korean history: the threat of Russian occupation was replaced by Japanese occupation, which was in turn replaced by American occupation and persists today with the present fact of tens of thousands of American troops stationed along Korea’s demilitarized zone. This series of substitutions is quite literally an example of repeating history, and through its formal innovations, *Dictée* takes up the enormous task of reliving this history without repeating “in oblivion.”
The burden of reliving history is assigned to a single heroine, whose voice emerges in the opening pages of the text. Dictée makes its way through its nine sections only after several initial starts and stops, and its stuttering beginnings provide a kind of textual birth for its heroine. The hesitations at the opening of this text demonstrate the difficulty in starting to speak, and Cha gives us a page of dictation, a literal “dictée” which shows us an instance of French converted into English. In the French version, the punctuation marks are written out (“Aller à la ligne...point...point...virgule”), and we can imagine the French being read aloud in order to be transcribed. The English translation that follows, however, is a bit of a surprise: the English version has the same spoken cues (“Open paragraph...period...period...comma”) written out as well (1).

In this dictation which is taken and returned with the markers intact, the content falls away and what emerges is the spoken quality of the exercise: the text dictated aloud in French is, in turn, spoken aloud in English. These punctuation marks keep their spoken places despite the transport from one language to another; they persist across the border between languages. These marks can be faithfully translated in a way that the other words in the exercise cannot, and in their stubborn existence we can see the position of the exile who keeps her physical integrity in the new tongue. Further, to return dictation without converting the voiced grammatical markers into silent punctuation marks results in a failed dictation: in refusing to become invisible, the punctuation marks signal the fact of dictation, the commands of dictating.15

In these opening pages, Cha exposes the agonies of speaking. The text poses the physical movements entailed (“The entire lower lip would lift upwards then sink back into its original place”) against what is within (“Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say”) (3). Cha names this speaker and genders her in French: the diseuse. The diseuse is the central figure of the (p.134) book, and this prefatory material lays out her shamanistic labor: she must be a speaker for disparate voices. She “allows others” to occupy her, literally and physically, and she must convert these presences into speech:

The initial invocation of the exile in the punctuation marks of
the failed dictation exercise now takes on the flesh of the
disease herself: “Punctuation. She would become, herself,
demarcations.” She is herself a border between these other
presences and their voices; she takes the place of the spoken
punctuation marks that would not disappear seamlessly into
the dictated text. Her unique presence reveals that what is
within does not simply find a matching exteriorized
expression: all speech must be channeled through a painful
moment of embodied delivery; it must be conveyed across the
interruptions of punctuation marks and multiple demarcations.

The disease marks the traces of dictation, and her art is
inseparable from a complicated notion of coercion. Speech is
never free from the tinge of occupation in this text, and Dictée
insists that the labor of the individual speaker caught between
two tongues exists along the same continuum as political
occupation. The occupations in this text are multiply figured—
from the literary to the political—and in all instances they
endanger the physical integrity of the disease. The very fact of
speech is inseparable from a historical memory and political
understanding; writ large, the disease producing a voice
evokes one nation’s occupation of another. She incurs a grave
risk in her labor of delivery; speech in this text is propelled by
loss and a twentieth-century political occupation. Yet Cha
cannot imagine a world without such boundaries, and she
demonstrates that existence is itself founded on a divide: the
disease, figured at the cusp, must walk along this fine edge in
order to be a voice for others at the same time that she signals
the dangers of attempting this ventriloquism. Each time she
makes such an attempt, she is met with the dividing line
between herself and others, between the present and the past.
Her work is in large part an effort to retrieve voices made
distant in time and space, and she manages not to slip into the
dangers of repeating history only by keeping her position
along the divide. Dictée acknowledges the mere flicker of a
difference between the two, however; the pain the disease
incurs in taking in others is only a shade away from
occupation. Indeed, it is crucial for her text that the ritual of
the disease flirts with this edge of occupation because it is
only at this border that we can imagine the experience of
occupation. The reliving of history verges on repeating it in
order to address the folly of repetition whose interrogation is
the driving force behind this text.
The prefatory material of the text closes with a poem created out of the initial dictation exercise between French and English. The poem takes its title from the final line of the dictation on page one ("There is someone period From a far period close quotation marks"): "From A Far." On the eve of nine days of channeling speech, the text provides a portrait of this “someone” hemmed in by demarcations, punctuation marks which break into her arrival and condition her existence. The poem tries to identify this figure by posing a series of questions of belonging:

From A Far
What nationality
or what kindred and relation
what blood relation
what blood ties of blood
what ancestry
what race generation
what house clan tribe stock strain
what lineage extraction
what breed sect gender denomination caste
what stray ejection misplaced
Tertium Quid neither one thing nor the other
Tombe des nues de naturalized
what transplant to dispel upon (20)

The identificatory questions proliferate and grow in specificity, but the poem does not attempt to answer them. In this portrait of the diseuse we never learn anything more than what the title of the poem tells us: she is “from afar.”
After the questions about national and blood affiliation, a second site appears, and we are signaled to the fact of its being another nation because it is written in French, the other language of the dictation exercise. The naturalized are thunderstruck, “Tombe des nues,” and all they possess is their bodies, shorn of “house clan tribe stock strain.” Literally posited between these two nations and languages, however, is the phrase “Tertium Quid,” pointedly written in Latin, which has a transnational existence in both English and French. 16 Like the punctuation marks of the diseuse, the use of Latin describes a position at the border between two languages. The notion of this “third thing” reveals that the exile remains trapped between two places: the first demands a precise categorization which overwhelms; the second site is marked by the bewildering demands of naturalization. The diseuse keeps herself separate from these two options which threaten to swallow her: hence, the diseuse can only be this “Tertium quid” “from afar”; and when “afar” is separated into its syllables we are made to expect a missing place, the noun modified by “far.” But it is only the distance itself that we can be sure of.

(p.136) The poem’s final line provides a gnomic portrait of exile. “What transplant to dispel upon” recasts the anaphoric construction of the previous questions of belonging, creating a statement instead of a question. The notion of dispelling, with its suggestion of both ridding the mind of and scattering, is caught in a complicated grammar which makes the transplant the object of the action. Cha exploits this confusion between subject and object throughout the text; it is one of the ways in which she registers the fact of occupation. The agent of the action isn’t clearly stated because the diseuse never has a straightforward agency: she is always being worked on and through; she is always channeling others. Instead, the poem closes with the act of dispelling, the action of releasing out of a vessel—often, out of the body—which is crucial to Cha’s notion of speech and writing. To close with this act makes dispelling integral to the experience of exile, and these opening pages of the text finally declare their intention to meditate upon different experiences of dispelling through the figure of someone from afar, between two realms, who takes on the responsibility of voicing this liminal experience.

Breaking English
The third section of the text, “Urania/Astronomy,” expands upon the role of this “tertium” position, ultimately showing us an anatomy of the body of the exile trapped between French and English. The opening image of the section is a Chinese chart of the human body, a universe of a body composed of starry points on the black page. This chart diagrams two sides of a body, and these two halves prefigure the doubled contents of this section. Cha opens this day of devotion with a minute description of giving blood, in which the line of blood flowing into the needle is called “near-black liquid ink” (64). She imagines the needle as an empty body, awaiting the blood/ink, and we can imagine the opening figure of the human body as the vessel which will be slowly emptied. Cha focuses on the drops of blood that spill onto a cotton square: “Stain from within dispel in drops in spills” (64). In writing “dispel,” she reminds us of the statement of exile that concluded “From A Far”: the diseuse’s painful, halting arrival at speech is mirrored by this figuration of writing, in which escaping blood is like flowing ink.

Cha insists that the surplus of blood is itself textual:

She pushes hard the cotton square against the mark.

*Stain begins to absorb the material spilled on.*

Something of the ink that resembles the stain from the interior emptied onto emptied into emptied upon this boundary this surface. (65)
The elegant reversal of this passage, in which the spill absorbs the material, insists on the importance of the surface; the spill spreads to match its shape. The singularity of the passage lies in its supreme textuality; the innovation of *Dictée* lies in Cha's ability to expand the text, to make it capacious enough to show us the fullness of the spreading stain it captures. The diseuse is herself a boundary, and the blood that flows from her is textual: its inky quality defines and marks the surface it touches. The passage ends with a command: “When possible ever possible to puncture to scratch to imprint. Expel. Ne te cache pas. Révèle-toi. Sang. Encre. Of its body's extension of its containment” (65). This call to action elaborates upon the act of dispelling, tying these acts to the body in an exhortation to reveal the self. “From A Far” closed by insisting on action; the opening pages of “Urania/Astronomy” tie this action to the body and the physical act of writing. And in switching into French, Cha reminds us of both halves of the dictation exercise, inaugurating the acts of translation which follow.

The call to scratch and imprint is answered by a spare lyric, given to us in French and English on facing pages. This poem presents a lyric “I” who struggles to capture a single memory which evades her. The modern lyric, from Wordsworth on, typically presents the self through an evocation of a specific time and place; when Cha struggles to retain a memory, however, she marks a destabilization of the lyric self—she is no longer tied to a single moment and her identity suffers as a result. The poem opens with the fleeting memory:

> J’écoutais les cygnes.
> Les cygnes dans la pluie. J’écoutais. (66)

I heard the swans in the rain I heard (67)

In French, this opening has an echo: Baudelaire's great portrait of exile, “Le cygne.” Cha returns to the French Symbolist lyric, with its profoundly lonely first person, and in writing against this beautiful standard, she demarcates the position of her diseuse by showing us the difficulties of the lyric “I” for her exile.
In Baudelaire’s poem, the swan conjured out of memory reminds the poet simultaneously of Andromache and “la nègresse” searching for “la superbe Afrique” (164) two exemplary portraits of feminine exile. Baudelaire describes memories “plus lourds que des rocs” (164) (heavier than stones) in which a swan that has escaped from a menagerie dips its wings in the gritty Parisian gutter. We hear the swan’s words in Baudelaire’s poem: “Eau, quand donc pleuvras-tu? quand tonneras-tu, foudre?” (164) (Rain, when will you fall? Lightning, when will you strike?). Years later, in a changed city, the poet ponders this “mythe étrange et fatal” (164) (strange, fatal myth):

Je pense à mon grand cygne, avec ses gestes fous
Comme les exilés, ridicule et sublime,
Et rongé d’un désir sans trêve! (164)
(I think of my great swan, with his wild gestures like those of exiles, ridiculous and sublime, and consumed by an unceasing desire.)

The swan is interchangeable with Andromache and the “nègresse” because all exiles share the same quality: ridiculous and sublime, they are eaten away by a single desire. In her gestures, the exile is a figure physically shaped by her desire for home; the ferocity and purity of this desire moves the poet to cry out “A quiconque a perdu ce qui ne se retrouve/ Jamais, jamais!” (164) (to those who have lost what can never, never be reclaimed). Baudelaire remarks parenthetically that “la forme d’une ville/Change plus vite, hélas! que le coeur d’un mortel” (162) (alas the shape of a city changes more quickly than the heart of a man), and this sense of a city which alters beyond the poet renders the Paris of the past into a kind of lost home for the poet. The poem ends by considering a series of exiled figures, and Baudelaire includes himself in their ranks: the poet is himself “dans la forêt où mon esprit s’exile” (164) (in the forest where my spirit is exiled). In exile, the spirit of the poet is not a part of the changing urban landscape. In his forest, unchanging in his melancholy, he is consumed by thoughts of growing bands of exiles, “Aux captifs, aux vaincus!…à bien d’autres encor!” (164, original ellipsis) (Of captives, of the vanquished…and many others besides!), until the whole world seems to be swept into his grieving.
The moving and absolute desire of the exile, however, becomes something else in Cha's hands. After remembering the speech of the swans, the poem acknowledges the effects of time on this memory:

Là. Des années après
Impossible de distinguer la Pluie.
Vient de dire. Va dire.
Souvenu mal entendu. Pas certain. (66)

There. Years after
no more possible to distinguish the rain.
No more. Which was heard.
Will just say. Having just said.
Remembered not quite heard. Not certain.
Heard, not at all. (67)

(p.139) The memory has eroded with time. Not only is it impossible to distinguish the words from the rain, it is impossible to distinguish what was said from what is about to be said. I read Cha's poem as a recollection of Baudelaire's meditation on exile, but in her hands the poem has remembered the swan's cry for rain as rain itself.

The English version on the facing page adds an extra emphasis to the close of the strophe: “Heard, not at all.” Even the fact of having heard the words is questioned, and on the next page the poem confuses the memory of the memory:

Là. Plus tard, peu certain, si c'était
la pluie, la parole, mémoire.
Mémoire d'un rêve.
Comment cela s'éteint. Comment l'éteindre.
Alors que cela.
s'éteint. (68)

There. Later, uncertain, if it was
the rain, the speech, memory.
Remembered from a dream.
How it diminishes itself. How to Dim
inish itself. As
it dims. (69)
This opening “Là” marks another passage of time, in which the memory itself could have been, as the English puts it, “Remembered from a dream.” Unlike Baudelaire’s complete recall, Cha’s poem muses over the disintegration of memory. The speech of the swan is never cited in Cha’s poem—indeed, it becomes unclear if the cries that Baudelaire quotes in his poem were ever voiced. The speech of the exile is utterly lost because Dictée hesitates at the threshold of Baudelaire’s poem: Cha complicates even the possibility of speech for the exile. Indeed, the whole of the text demonstrates that speaking is itself the most difficult aspect of the exilic condition. Further, if the cry is no longer distinguishable from the rain or a dream, I would like to suggest that this is a nuanced version of the “désir sans trêve” of the exile: she realizes that the idea of home is a dream, a fantasy, and a running, constant sound like rain.

Baudelaire’s “I” imagined a forest for his exiled heart in order to share in the experience of the swan; Cha’s “I” is herself in exile, and in this collapsing of the poet and the object of the poem the source of the cry becomes indeterminate. Indeed, collapsing the lyric self into the desolation of the swan silences the poet herself because Baudelaire’s modern lyric is premised on a flaneur who speaks beautifully despite everything (p. 140) he witnesses. By contrast, in Cha’s poem the rapidly fading memory of the cry is followed by a forced silence:

Mordre la langue.
Avaler profondément. Plus profondément.
Avaler. Plus encore.
Jusqu'a ce qu'il n'y aurait plus. D'organe.
Plus d'organe.
Cris. (68)

To bite the tongue.
Swallow. Again even more.
Just until there would be no more of organ.
Organ no more.
Cries. (69)

In French, “langue” denotes both tongue and language equally; the poem goes on to demonstrate the swallowing of sentences, paragraphs, and, ultimately, all speech. The final “Cries” of the strophic refers us to the cry of the exile which is absolutely lost in this muteness.
After the establishment of total silence, the poem returns to its beginnings, but with a difference:

J’écoutais les signes.
Absents. (68)

I heard the signs. Remnants. Missing.
The mute signs. Never the same.
Absent. (69)

In French, the exact echo of sound between “cygne” and “signe” locks the swan into a devastating muteness; it is forced to become an image. The English, however, cannot register the homonym of swan and sign in French. Cha does add a couple of words to the line in English (“Remnants. Missing.”) yet she does not attempt to compensate for the lost connection between swan and sign in French. Like the loss of memory to the dream, the poem demonstrates what is lost in translation, and the metamorphosis from “cygne” to “signe” silences the poem:

Images seulement. Seules. Images.
Les signes dans la pluie, j’écoutais. (70)

Images only. Alone. Images.
The signs in the rain I listened (71)

(p.141) The poem comes to a close in devastating silence: “Vider les mots./Vider le silence” (72). “Void the words./Void the silence” (73).

When we turn the page, however, we see that the poem has a kind of coda, and a gradual reversal is taking place:

Stop. Start. Starts.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.
Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.
Pidgeon. Semblance of speech. (75)
This time, the left-hand page does not give us the French version; instead, we are faced with medical diagrams of larynx, lungs, and vocal cords. Curiously, the French has turned into the diagrams, clinical images of the organs of speech. The French has been broken off, and what emerges is the English freed from its existence as translation. Although this English is no longer bound to French, it is itself “Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.” Yet this broken English suddenly takes on the richness of the French, mimicking the wordplay between cygne/signe, which had previously been impossible to render into English: in misspelling “Pidgeon,” Cha's English registers the homonym between “pigeon” and “pidgin.” By pairing swan and pigeon, sign and pidgin, we can see that broken English creates a flexibility within the language which had previously been lost in the movement between French and English.

The English is broken because it has carried the weight of translation, and I believe that “Pidgeon” is akin to the “Tertium quid” of “From A Far.” Broken English reveals the fact of emigration; like the persistent punctuation marks of the translation exercise, it bears the evidence of its speaker's movement between two realms. If we consider the medical diagrams which take over the French half of the poem, we can see that Cha insists on a physical intervention, a reminder of the body. The exquisite language of Baudelaire's poem is literally swallowed by the diagram of the throat Cha presents to us; she interrogates this construction of the figure of exile as the object of the poet's longing. In converting swan to sign, Cha puts forth a subtle critique of the modern lyric, in which objects all too often become silent images. Her poem challenges the lyric persona who, in regarding his objects, stands apart from them. Cha insists instead that the poem disintegrates when the swan becomes a mere image.

Ultimately, exile is a physical condition that constrains speech; unlike the lyric poet, the diseuse exposes the boundary between two languages even though she risks the poem itself in the process. In shattering the rarefied air of the Symbolist lyric, Cha shows us the limits of the modern lyric; indeed, in exposing these limits her art drives straight to its boundaries, the edge which the diseuse simultaneously exposes and inhabits.

(p.142) Lyric Descents
Perhaps Cha's most startling revision of the lyric self happens on a formal level in *Dictée*: she casts this painfully embodied and fragmented figure within an epic frame. Cha has rewritten the lyric “I” into a diseuse who is never a single self—and this diseuse conducts an epic descent in a complicated attempt to access a motherland and mother tongue with the full knowledge of the danger and impossibility of the task. Just as Cha revisits the modern lyric in her interrogation of Baudelaire, the text as a whole inhabits the dark terrain of the modernist epic. I think we can read the larger logic of *Dictée* against the opening gestures of Pound's *Cantos* in order to explore Cha’s new iteration of the American epic—one in which she further expands a genre famous for its openness while at the same time exposing its limits.

The very first page of *Dictée* shows us the cry of the exile in a photograph of lines in Korean etched in stone:

Mother  
I miss you  
I am hungry  
I want to go home

This photograph was taken on the underground walls of a coal mine in Japan, carved into rock by a Korean worker. We can see the swan's swallowed cry and imagine the body of this exile, not speaking but chiseling these words. These scrawled lines, untranslated, stand as the single instance of Hangul in the text; the Korean language itself is a ghostly underground presence, never voiced. In this frontispiece, Cha takes the first stop in *The Cantos*, Odysseus's descent to the underworld, and expands it into a landscape for her epic. To consider the anonymous Korean worker exiled in Japan alongside Pound’s translation of Odysseus’s underworld descent is to compare two epic beginnings, and in creating a kind of dialogue between them we may register Cha's revision of the Poundian epic in a tale that includes a wholly different history.
Cha's frontispiece provides a lyrical and visual counterpart to Pound's translation of Andreas Divus's sixteenth-century Latin version of the *Odyssey* in Canto 1. Upon recounting Odysseus's encounters with various shades, including a former shipmate, the prophet Tiresias, and his mother, Anticlea, Pound orders Divus to “Lie quiet” as he performs his own translation. Pound speaks to his fellow translator at a crucial moment, interrupting and abruptly ending the account of Odysseus's visit to the underworld. This sharp intrusion immediately follows the line “And then Anticlea came,” the second appearance of Odysseus's mother in Pound's rendering of the descent. The first time Odysseus sees his mother, Pound dispenses with her in order to speak to Tiresias: (p.143) “And Anticlea came, whom I beat off, and then Tiresias Theban” (4). If we go back to the *Odyssey*, we learn that Odysseus's sorrow when he fails to embrace his mother who “fluttered out of my hands like a shadow or a dream” “sharpened at his heart,” but Pound's translation transforms Odysseus's grief into a harsh act.22 Anticlea's second approach drives Odysseus out of the underworld, and after the apostrophe to Divus, Pound leaps to Circe. The Canto closes with an image of Aphrodite, and this beautifully rendered portrait completes the turn away from Anticlea. The mother is not only forcibly repudiated; she is banished by goddesses and gold, two of the ideals of Pound's epic. The epic is a tale about a hero's homecoming, and Pound's innovation is to turn the homecoming into a series of exempla of the ideal state; hence, mother and motherland can be dispensed with because even as he winnows through millennia of history Pound is seeking to make new, to envision a new state.
If the modernist epic is predicated on a new kind of homelessness indicative of the modern condition and searches for better models of the state, Cha's reinvention of the genre knows better than to look for this ideal state. Instead, the frontispiece returns to the mother beaten away by Pound; she is the complicated object of longing in Cha's underworld descent, even as we must understand that this desired figure can never be fully reclaimed. Indeed, the exilic condition Cha insists upon founds its existence in transit, in the fact of the flight and return, even as the coordinates at either end of the travel become blurred and change places as home and away. Cha's work dwells on the elements of epic that Pound took for granted and scorned: Dictée's opening image calls out for the mother that Pound's Odysseus repudiates, and her work agonizes over the role of the translator Pound openly rebukes in his epic opening.

Immediately preceding the first muse, Cha writes: “And it begins” (19). In her reading of Dictée, Wong notes the similarity of this line to the first line of Pound's epic (“And then went down to the ship”) (123), and in Cha's phrase I think we see a combination of both this famous opening and the succinct anticipation of the close of Canto 1: “So that:” (5), the final line that propels us into the whole of the epic that follows. Dictée's “And it begins” thus encapsulates Pound's epic beginning, and the memory of the frontispiece combined with this line—the two bookends to the prefatory material of the text before the onset of the novena—usher us into an epic expanse. Cha most explicitly lays out the text's epic journey in a section entitled “Elitere/Lyric Poetry,” the single invented muse of the text (replacing the muse of music, Euterpe). In converting lyric poetry into a muse, she turns this genre into one of the arts and sciences embodied by the muses; the lyric becomes a figure on the order of astronomy or history, thus making the lyric self coexistent with the universal and historical preoccupations of the text. It is curiously fitting that Cha's epic descent should be featured in “Elitere/Lyric Poetry”; she has lodged the small gem of the lyric within an epic frame.
Cha’s brilliant achievement is to cast a politically inflected journey to the neocolonial center as a classic heroic one. The text shows us a range of heroines, from Yu Guan Soon, a Korean revolutionary who formed a resistance group in 1919 at the age of sixteen, to Cha’s mother’s experience as a young teacher in Manchuria—and ultimately, to the experience of Dictée’s speaker, caught in between languages. All of these figures dramatize a boundary, and amid the many boundaries in this text, the movie screen holds a paradigmatic place. Cha was first and foremost a filmmaker, and one of the innovations of this text is its manipulations of the plastic possibilities of cinema. “Melpomene/Tragedy” opens with a map of Korea, divided between North and South, and the facing page describes the experience of sitting in a movie theater. At the appointed time, stillness reigns: “The submission is complete” (79). The following page opens with a letter from Cha in Korea to her mother in the United States, in which she notes that nothing has changed: she takes part in a demonstration, and she writes, “I am in the same crowd, the same coup, the same revolt, nothing has changed” (81). This instance of repeating history devastates the speaker, and Cha gives us an explicit image of this repetition:

You soldiers appear in green. Always the green uniforms the patches of camouflage....You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen. (85–86)

The rows of soldiers facing their northern countrymen at the boundary demonstrate the deadly force of an inexorably repeating history. The section ends with a submission to this division: “Suffice that should be nation against nation suffice that should have been divided into two which once was whole” (88). It must “suffice” that this tragedy is to be accepted, and the section closes by demonstrating this sufficiency in terms of the cinema screen: “Suffice Melpomene, arrest the screen en-trance flickering hue from behind cast shadow silhouette from back not visible. Like ice. Metal. Glass. Mirror” (88). This is an understanding of the screen as hard, material object, as implacable as the DMZ and a line of soldiers in green.
Yet inside the theater the screen is transformed from a white object to a moving and living entity. The following section, “Erato/Love Poetry,” rewrites the experience of the cinema into an arena of multiple possibilities. In this section, the pages are laid out like shots in a film: as one moment is described, the matching section on the facing page is blank—and so on, in alternating succession. Unlike the facing pages of the poem in French and English in “Urania/Astronomy,” this crosscutting illustrates a dynamic way of bringing together both pages at the same time. Unlike previous sections in which hesitations and divisions were prominently displayed, this section brings together its multiple strands. The two senses of the cinema screen, blank whiteness and living surface, illustrate Cha's distinction between repeating and reliving. This section rewrites the viewer's own entry into the cinema, and the viewer is viewed on the screen; the actions of the viewer have dictated the opening of the film, and in this possibility I think that Cha is describing a textual, not filmic, plasticity. Cha creates a textual and supremely malleable film on the page, and the film which unfolds sutures together a range of materials from the journals of St. Thérèse de Lisieux to Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. In fact, even after the film has ended and we exit the theater, we have not lost the powers of entry and identification learned during the viewing session: the film had ended with a scene of snow (“Suddenly. Snow.” [114]), and Cha describes the world outside the theater, in which “It had been snowing. During the while” (118). The snow from outside the theater has come onto the screen, and the snow from the film is falling outside: this is the radical possibility of the reconceptualized screen Cha argues for in the text, and her aesthetic experiments ultimately demonstrate how we might relive history without repeating it.
Cha’s accomplishment is to make painfully clear the specific contours of Korean American experience at the same time that she marshals a range of allusions well beyond the bounded limits of Asian America initially set by the ethnic nationalist agenda. Just as she refers to the origins of the Western canon and high modernism, Cha moves beyond the space- and time-bound confines of Asian America. *Dictée* describes an astonishing artistic freedom, but all of its innovations are anchored to a central experience of occupation and, at bottom, the difficulties of speech. The fluidity of these connections is singularly suited to lay bare the dark alliances and ruptures at the heart of *Dictée*: Cha squarely indicts both American involvement in and disregard for the Korean peninsula, and just as Japanese soldiers greeted her mother in Manchuria, where she had fled to escape them, Cha captures the pervasiveness of occupation by plumbing its living echoes, felt deeply by Cha herself. Cha holds out the revolutionary possibility that an aesthetic rendering of the experience of occupation may be more than a representation: it may permit us to understand “the pain to say”; history may come to life in the manner of the transformative possibilities of the cinema screen.

*Dictée* closes by demonstrating screens on which life is cast. In “Polymnia/Sacred Poetry,” the ninth muse, the text recounts a simple story: a young girl, in search of a cure for her ailing mother, meets a woman at a well who gives her ten packets of medicine. Nineteen packets are for her mother, but the tenth is a gift for herself, and in adding the tenth packet, Cha signals the completion of the text’s novena, the nine days of meditation. The story ends with the child about to enter the house where her mother awaits her:

> Already the sun was in the west and she saw her village coming into view. As she came nearer to the house she became aware of the weight of the bundles and the warmth in her palms where she had held them. Through the paper screen door, dusk had entered and the shadow of a small candle was flickering. (170)
She arrives at dusk and faces her house, lit within by a solitary candle; the warmth and heft of the bundles promise recovery. “Polymnia/Sacred Poetry” ends here, at the threshold, the border between child and mother, figured as a paper door. At this final moment, the child hesitates before the flickering paper, a private cinema screen, because the art of *Dictée* is to make such boundaries visible. It is crucial that Cha stops short of showing us the healing properties of the medicine packets; the text can provide a living, feeling understanding of division, but it cannot heal the rupture. Cha’s formal strategies capture the experience of division, from Korean American alienation to mythic plights, and *Dictée*’s aesthetic difficulty beautifully matches the formidable challenge of this project.

Building Bridges

Myung Mi Kim’s poetry shares Cha’s obsessions: the open wound of history and its repetitions, the work of translation and dictation, and the figure in transit. Against the mythic tones of *Dictée*, however, the poetic consciousness that speaks out of Kim’s poetry shows us different dimensions of exile. In contrast to Cha’s breathtaking expanse of epic underworld, Kim’s artistry takes place in minutely observed details. I read Kim against *Dictée*’s modernist legacy, but Kim’s redeployment of these aesthetic tools shows us different strategic uses of this literary past. In Kim’s writing, the words emerge in compact bursts, surrounded by white space. Kim’s language bears the evidence of the pain of speech because their complicated sound patterns show us how difficult it can be to assign meaning. The difficult and dazzling combinations of sound in Kim’s poetry make us sound out her lines, and one of the joys of reading her poetry is the desire to look up a known word because it suddenly sounds different in the context she has made for it. To make uncertain our own competence in English is not only a demonstration of immigrant experience but also an aesthetic renewal of the language.24
Modern Korean history looms over Kim's poetry, and her wordplays are embedded within a history of war. Her poetry is especially attentive to the troubling intimacy between the United States and South Korea; Kim's poetry often imagines Koreans in America and Americans in Korea. In her essay “Korean American Literature,” Elaine H. Kim discusses a crucial moment in which these two experiences overlap in her reading of “Food, Shelter, Clothing” from Myung Mi Kim's first collection of poetry, *Under Flag* (1991). Elaine H. Kim cites a crucial passage in the poem: (p.147)

They had oared to cross the ocean  
And where had they come to  
These bearers of a homeland  

Those landing amphibious (under cover of night)  
In a gangplank thud and amplification take  
Spot of ground. (22–23)

Elaine H. Kim discusses this moment:

Kim draws an ironic parallel between the Korean immigrants' “landing amphibious (under cover of night)” and the United States military landing in Korea. Unlike the United States invaders, however, the immigrants walk a “gangplank,” taking up only a “little space” in the vastness of the United States, a limited and restricted “spot of ground” where they will live tyrannized by fear of “smear” and attack. (176)
This “ironic parallel” between Korean and American action stands at the heart of Myung Mi Kim's poetry: Kim imagines the Korean immigrant on United States soil simultaneously with the covert United States landing on the Korean peninsula during the Korean War. This is certainly an indictment of United States action, as Elaine H. Kim points out, but in describing these shared movements the poem is pointing out not just the extraordinary disparity between the two instances but the singular connection that they share: America’s “Forgotten War” has everything to do with these unseen migrants who arrive “under cover of night.” One built the bridge that the other crosses. Kim's point again and again in her poetry is that the immigrant cannot be separated from the military and political forces that created the conditions of her migration; she shows us the ghostly imprints these opposing experiences make on each other because her work shows us the bridges whose construction too often remains obscured.

As in Dictée, Korea’s division along the 38th parallel is Kim’s central preoccupation. “Demarcation,” another poem from Under Flag, describes this implacable fact and the difficulty in describing it: “No way to speak it” (37). The poem closes with the incoherence of the division:

As compass locates relocates and cuts fresh figures
As silence to mate(d) world
Not founded by mother or father
Spun into coherence (cohere)
Cohere who can say (38)
The arbitrary line of the DMZ, drawn by the superpowers, “cuts fresh figures,” two new countries. This division creates a pair mated not to each other but to a brutally mated world, aligned with the dyad of United States and USSR in the logic of the Cold War. The notion of an entity “Not founded by mother or father” underscores the unnaturalness of the division, one which issues from a larger power struggle. Interestingly, the question of coherence alludes to Pound’s failed coherence at the end of The Cantos: “And I am not a demigod,/I cannot make it cohere” (816). Kim invokes Pound’s epic failure, but she emphasizes the fact of this failure “Spun into coherence.” The trouble is that the incoherence of the division has become obscured; unlike The Cantos, it is not that the poet cannot make it cohere—in present fact it simply does not. Pound’s fantasy of providing models of idealized states doesn’t quite fall apart, but he laments that his poem does; in contrast, the world Kim witnesses remains arbitrarily divided and she implicates attempts at spinning this fact into coherence. Kim makes a reference to high modernism in her poetry, but she alludes to Pound’s epic only to destabilize the very notion of coherence that Pound sought, suggesting instead that the attempt to make it cohere may have been the problem all along.

The high modernist legacy explicitly emerges in the book’s title poem. “Under Flag” shows us the battlefield of the Korean War, a battlefield which includes not only weaponry and soldiers but “Chonui, a typical Korean town” and

Of elders who would have been sitting in the warmest part of the house with comforters draped around their shoulders peeling tangerines. (16)

This intimate image is balanced against a different American experience, however; Kim goes on to describe the experience of American soldiers:

At dawn the next morning, firing his machine gun, Corporal Leonard H. was shot and instantly killed while stopping the Reds’ last attempts to overrun and take the hilltop. (17)
This scene provides a dramatic counterpart to the elders: the indoors of the house against the open hilltop, victims against soldiers, old against young, Korean against American. Yet these diametrically opposing scenes have been forced to share the same world. As in the “ironic parallels” Elaine H. Kim noted, we realize that, despite these differences, the poem is describing a shared experience, and Kim shows us the brute facts of what both sets must face in a list of proper nouns of weapons which explode in succession. And as Kim writes, “More kept coming. More fell” (18).

From this vision of war, the poem moves to the present of the speaker, expressing her protesting voice by recording both her distance from the Korean War and the wounds that persist despite the years. While the passages explicitly about the war are cast in the past tense, much of the poem is written into the present; Kim writes that “The eye won't be appeased” (149) (19) and the emphatic present tense of the contraction reminds us that even years afterward, the way we see is indelibly marked by war. The lost figure of a schoolchild caught in the crossfire propels the poem into the future tense:

His name stitched on his school uniform, flame
Flame around what will fall as ash
Kerosene soaked skin housing what will burn (19)

Distance does not make the flames any less scorching; their intensity pushes them before us. “Under Flag” finally closes with a lingering image:

Faces spread in a field
On the breeze what might be azaleas in full bloom

Composed of many lengths of bone (19)

The poem shows us the effects of years under “Sun, an affliction hitting white” (19) and returns us to the battlefield. Even if the poem has cast the battle itself into the past, the battlefield cannot be left behind and the poem returns to it to find a place of uneasy rest. The Korean War settled with the divide, after the losses of both Korean civilians and American soldiers, and what is striking about this final image is that the faces in this field could be Korean or American.

This closing image echoes Pound's most famous Imagist poem, “In a Station of the Metro”: 
The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough. (Personae 111)

Pound's “apparition” is the culmination of Imagism's “intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time” (Literary Essays 4), and the perfection of this image recalls the precise strokes of the ideogram. The beauty of the faces figured as petals in Pound's poem resonates with Kim's image, but the contrast between life and death establishes an inexorable difference. Kim's image is the afterimage of Pound's: these faces have been reduced to their bones; they are like flowers because they dot the field. The noted collision of the subway with the natural image in Pound's poem has been recast onto an altogether different level; if Pound's juxtaposition surprised with its urban setting, this image is startling in its deceptively pastoral quality. The flowerlike faces in the field and the bones which constitute them have returned to nature. What's missing is the modern engine which created the image—and by virtue of its significant absence Kim leads us directly to it. The negative space (p.150) of this image is the machinery of war, and it is Kim's innovation to use the tools of Imagism to direct us to what is no longer visible. In this, she turns Imagism away from the image and toward the past, to the event of war.
Kim’s image startles because it uses the precise art of the modernists, borrowed from Eastern poetry, and retrains it on the Eastern stage of war. Pound’s argument for the presence and emotional effect of Imagist poetry is here borrowed in the service of rendering something that happened in the past immediate in its emotional impact. Kim turns the Imagist innovation back on itself, taking it back to its origins in the East, and through this imagined return she renews the innovation of the beginning of the century into a tool for a late twentieth-century plight. If we return to the beginning of “Under Flag,” we see that the poem opens with the motion of “Casting and again casting” and the present tense of the figures of the evacuees in the “Rigor of those who carry households on their backs” (16); and it may be possible to cast this particular line even farther: the “singular wave” of these evacuees is part of a larger movement of many singular waves that make their way to American shores. The poem gestures toward the different flows of displaced people whose link to another time and place shapes their relation to the United States. And if “Casting and again casting” is further stretched to mean casting and recasting, in this line the poem may already be signaling the labor of reenvisioning and refashioning modernist poetry which closes it. For Kim, the active manipulation of the stylistic traces of an Orientalist poetic renewal provides a means of addressing American involvement in the world beyond its borders; Kim uses an Imagist effect to demonstrate the enormous price of East and West coming together. To recast the American poetic lineage is a way for the poet both to register her difference and even dissent and to add herself to the line.

Where We Are
Kim's long poem *Dura* (1998) mines the epic expanses invoked by *Dictée*. Kim's title is a tribute to Cha's speaker—“Dura” returns us to the first day of *Dictée*’s novena: “She makes complete her duration” (28). This line described the diseuse in her readiness to be a voice for others, and Kim channels Cha's voice as the basis for her text. *Dura* is composed of seven titled sections, and “Cosmography,” the opening section, elaborates “The beginnings of things” (9), going on to show us the slow dawning of land and language. From the elaboration of gradual discovery found in “Cosmography,” the next three sections lay the groundwork for the “I” which fully emerges in the middle of the text. “Measure,” the second section, balances the travels of Marco Polo against the experience of the “natives” living in the fantastic region he seeks out. The next section, *(p.151)* “Labors,” describes a movement “Due west directly west” (32) to America, and those who make this journey encounter grueling work. The fourth and closing section of *Dura*’s groundwork, ”Chart,” creates a complicated music by weaving together two separate strands of words in which memories of hardship in Korea are posed against the expanse of “An America as big as it is” (42).
After the careful mapping of the first four sections of the text, “Thirty and Five Books,” the longest section, shows us the journey of the immigrant. The section opens with an admission: “Never having been here when the sun rose” (53), but we move rapidly through this unknown past, arriving at the point of “Deployments to the assigned parallel” (54), the nation divided. This is a compressed history of Korea, and upon this establishment of the DMZ we meet something like a protagonist: “Unrecognized she went about the city” (54). This line, taken from Odysseus's movements through the Phaiakian city while shrouded by Athena’s powers, describes Odysseus's last stopping place before his return to Ithaka. As a guest in Alkinoos’s palace, Odysseus tells his greatest tales, and with the assistance of his host he is sent on his way home fully stocked and rested. Clearly, this is a journey in the epic sense of the word; and in referring to this moment in the Odyssey, Kim pinpoints both the heights of Odysseus's skill as a storyteller and the beginning of Odysseus's actual journey home. Kim deliberately calls upon the epic voyage and refigures it for the “she” of the female immigrant, and in alluding to this moment in the Odyssey, Kim suggests that the move from Korea to America is a kind of homecoming. This is more than an “ironic parallel”: perhaps this suggestion of the Korean going to America to claim her household may implicate the shaping force of American foreign policy in Korea; as in Dictée, Cha sketches a homecoming to the neocolonial center.

The first few pages of this section provide us with markers that place us in Korea: “Various kinds of rice in the manner of living in that country” (55), “Little in the way of progress. Firesticks bundled” (59), “Primitive tabulation of need” (60). This enduring agricultural existence is subject to violence:

Describe the success of the random bomb. Black rain
had its mark. (61)

This dispassionate mention of an exploding bomb is followed, on the next page, by a description of “its mark”:

**p.152** This compact description shows us the speed of the event, the horror of the simultaneous separation and fusing together of bodies as a result of the smoking metal.

From a portrait of a nation transformed into a battlefield, the following page shows us the migration:

In so locating a time of geography before the compass.
Do not ask again where are we. (63)

In the confusion of the journey, we can hear the voice of the adult admonishing the child for asking “Where are we?” In setting off for this new land, this family takes a course little different from that of Marco Polo “before the compass”: the geography of the ocean between East and West remains the same. Once landed, they discover

Population gathered to population. More uninhabited space in America than elsewhere. (63)

America is remarkable for its space, but the tendency of “Population gathered to population” signals the troubles that are to come in this place of uninhabited spaces; and immediately after the statement of arrival in America, the poem shows us the Los Angeles riots:

He was wearing a white T-shirt and jeans
Beat the fresh burning
The boy in the newspaper wore a dark shirt
Flakes of fire ripen fire
It could not be my son
Agate of insistence
Contents of the boy's pocket—a dime and a pen
Percussive
In the LA Times the picture was in color
Body moving in circle be fire
What looked black in the Korean newspaper was my son's blood (64–65)
This passage describes a literalization of Cha’s conflation of blood and ink: here, the bloodied shirt is rendered in black ink in the Korean newspaper, and this giving of blood supplies words for the news. This blood does not have an expressive function; it is only the result of violence. The factionalism within what had been imagined as “uninhabited space” results in another scene of smoking ruins.

Kim shows us different ethnic groups as variables in a painful and persistent equation: (p.153)

_____ arrived in America. Bare to trouble and foresworn.
Aliens aboard three ships off the coast. _____ and _____ clash. Police move in.

What is nearest is destroyed. (67)

This passage presents Dura’s most blunt portrait of America; we are not led to imagine that these recent arrivals in America will ever fully shed alien status. Kim makes this clear for even those who have inhabited America’s space for generations:

Torch and fire. Translate: 38th parallel. Translate: the first shipload of African slaves was landed at Jamestown (68)

The ship off the coast carries not only the next wave of immigrants but also suggests the ships of African slaves; these longtime inhabitants, too, retain a sense of their alien status in America. This rewritten translation exercise describes an unrelenting pattern. The equivalence of the groups that can be filled in for the two blanks of the repeated American story is here demonstrated for the two groups implicated in the Los Angeles riots, and both parties have arrived on these shores as a result of American intervention: for Koreans, the arbitrary assignment of the 38th parallel which America effected; for African Americans, the commissioned slave ships. Kim goes on to imagine other possible groups which could fill the blank spaces:

Hard and noisy enunciation.

A banter English gathers carriers.

What is nearest is destroyed. (73)
The figuration of “A banter English” amassing speakers turns the concept of naturalization on its head: instead of aliens folding themselves into America and English, a spoken English gathers and carries along these aliens. This is the extent of Americanization: a shared, spoken banter which brings together its speakers. The passage closes with a line heard twice in this section, “What is nearest is destroyed.” This is the conclusion drawn from examining America, and this repeated statement resonates with similar lines in The Cantos:

What thou lovest well remains,
the rest is dross
What thou lov’st well shall not be reft from thee
What thou lov’st well is thy true heritage (540–541)

(p.154) Pound wrote these lines during his incarceration in Pisa, and the bittersweet recognition in these lines has been heralded as the point of greatest beauty in his epic. In the face of the Los Angeles riots, however, the heroic self of Kim’s epic arrives at a very different conclusion: Pound’s “true heritage” is, for Kim, the Korean American son, and the fact of his death shows how “What is nearest is destroyed.” She rewrites the modernist epic in order to make her own ringing claims about the American experience. “What thou lovest well remains” and “I cannot make it cohere” are two of the most oft-quoted lines from The Cantos, and these lines stand as Pound’s two central and opposing convictions about his epic. True heritage is all; the rest is dross—and it is the aim of his epic to illustrate this true heritage; yet the late acknowledgment of incoherence shows us that this goal is impossible to sustain. Just as Under Flag’s allusion to coherence questioned it, Dura shows how readily what is nearest can “be reft from thee.” This guarantee of destruction stands as a kind of truth of America on the order of the blank spaces of the two replaceable parties which clash. As we have seen in the blank spaces in the American story, there is always a ship off the coast.
Kim presents her own immigrant experience in a two-page chronology, numbered from 6.1 to 35.0. This timeline of her life marks her age at key events (“32.10 Given birth 5:05AM” [80]), thus refocusing the figure at the center of the text, she who “walked about the city.” These memories inscribe Kim into “Thirty and Five Books,” which rewrites her thirty-five years into books. Pound was haunted by Whitman’s conflation of self and book (“Camerado, this is no book,/Who touches this, touches a man.”) and Kim reimagines this founding premise of the American long poem, but with the books and heroine embedded within the complex tale she unfolds. In the lineage of the American epic, with both Cha and Kim the poet has herself entered the poem; she occupies the spaces mapped out by the epic’s bardic voice.

“Thirty and Five Books” closes with a brief evocation of Dictée’s final myth:

Inside the hand-stitched pouch. Pebbles. A clean wind.

Having arrived here. Trace of timber in a gravelly loam, possibly part of a collapsed fence.

Affection to touch dirt.

All harmonics sound. (85)

I read this moment with the pockets of medicine in Cha’s text, and this final arrival not into a house but its traces rewrites the moment of the child at the screened door at the end of Dictée. In this case, the structure (p.155) has fallen; these lines do not somehow cover over the loss of “What is nearest is destroyed,” but they end on a note of affection. Dictée ultimately closed with ringing bells (“to break stillness bells fall a peal to sky” [179]), breaking into the silence of the text, and Kim recasts this great noise as the sound of harmony, felt in the dirt after destruction. By the end of “Thirty and Five Books,” the journey that began in the Korean countryside ends with an arrival. The heroine claims only “grav-elly loam,” but the harmonics that issue from the dirt herald a kind of homecoming.
The following section, “Progress in Learning,” shows us the slow work of making progress and creating something like a home, and “Hummingbird,” the final section of the poem, presents an image first suggested in “Cosmography,” Dura’s opening section: “If one thing is seen and seen clearly and the effort to see it/Hummingbird in foxglove whir” (14).

“Hummingbird” opens with the drudgery of learning, a translation exam composed of homilies of agricultural life. This command to translate is reminiscent of Dictée, but it quickly becomes impossible to complete the task because the lines are broken up with brackets that group the words in bewildering arrangements. Finally, the banality of the exercise is set aside, and the poet instead focuses her energies on observing the hummingbird:

wight's deer vetch
scarlet pimpernel
filerree
thistle
monkey flower
cow's parsnip
scotch broom
horse chestnut

Hummingbird on lavender (107)
The list describes a series of flowers with small blossoms which may entice the hummingbird, a catalog of blooms which delineates its possible journey. This is the hummingbird’s cosmography; the poem tells us that “Hummingbird happens as a sound first” (106), and from this sound we move on to careful observations which ultimately result in mapping out the path of the hummingbird. Kim's epic maps the complicated movements of sound, paying particular attention to the transformative forces of the gulfs which must be bridged between the points along the path. What began writ large as cosmography closes on a new understanding of the individual condition, and Dura closes on the poet herself, in her experiment. The figure of the hummingbird finally brings together a minute observation of the image and the larger arc of its path. Through her experiments with American poetry, Kim’s work (p.156) interrogates American action in Korea and Korean American experience in America: she contends with the aftermath of a fantasized intimacy between East and West come true. Both Cha and Kim discover formal modes for demonstrating the human costs of transpacific bridges built by poetic and political alliances.

Notes:
(1.) From Tripmaster Monkey; Kingston's ellipsis.

(2.) Wittman also mentions “a Chinese-American guy who rode with Jack and Neal. His name was Victor Wong, and he was a painter and an actor” (21).

(3.) Despite the prominence of Whitman, Tripmaster Monkey demonstrates an ambivalence toward poets, most notably in the figure of an aging stockboy Wittman encounters: “And here's this Yale Younger stock guy getting older and getting nowhere, ending up a minor poet” (51). In Wittman's rambling epic play, the Yale Younger Poet is given the part of Kipling: after a scene in which Kipling wrestles with a Mexican in a Chinatown poker club, “Rudyard Kipling exits, chased off by cherry bombs and cymbal clangs. Nobel Prize winner. No wonder the Yale Younger Poet was depressed in spite of honors” (300).
(4.) Chu opens her essay “Tripmaster Monkey, Frank Chin, and the Chinese Heroic Tradition” with a scene in which Wittman frets over the sound of steady typing in a neighboring apartment—he fears that a “workhorse big-novel writer” is out-creating him, but then dismisses this threat by concluding “it had to be a girl, a clerk typist, he hoped, a secretary, he hoped” (41). Chu discusses the monkey in Chinese myth and concludes, “By linking Wittman to Monkey, Kingston hints that Wittman, her combative rival Chin, also needs lessons in humility and detachment” (132).

(5.) As David Leiwei Li writes in “The Formation of Frank Chin,” “Frank Chin is apparently a fading figure on the Chinese American literary stage he has helped to construct” (211). In Imagining the Nation, Li identifies three phases of Asian American criticism: the “ethnic nationalist phase,” the “feminist phase,” and “heteroglossia” (185–186). In this schema, Kingston belongs in the second category—and it is important to remember that initial scholarly audiences celebrated The Woman Warrior as a liberatory women's novel.

(6.) In his reading of Chin's Donald Duk, Eng notes similarities between Chin and Kingston: “despite Chin's public denunciations—and in spite of the ideological gulf separating these two writers—Chin’s and Kingston's creative works clearly converge around a common set of historical anxieties and theoretical concerns regarding the truth status of the photographic image” (91).

(7.) In the MELUS interview with Marilyn Chin, Kingston describes China Men, her counterpart to The Woman Warrior, as a continuation of Williams's In the American Grain (71). One example of Kingston's modernist allusions can be found in a chapter title in China Men, “The Making of More Americans,” which suggests an echo between her work and Stein's American epic. China Men's allusions to Western literature balance the Chinese myths of The Woman Warrior: against Fa Mu Lan’s story, China Men retells the story of Robinson Crusoe, and Kingston's exploration of her parentage in these two texts is a literary exercise through which she connects an Asian American consciousness to a wealth of Chinese and American mythic worlds.
(8.) See Chu's *Assimilating Asians* for the importance of the Bildungsroman in Asian American literature. Lowe, however, coins the term *decolonizing novel* in order to argue for the anti-hegemonic function of Asian American novels against the problem of “privileging a nineteenth-century European genre as the model to be appropriated” (45).

(9.) Eliot defined the mythical method as “simply a way of controlling, of ordering, or giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (“Ulysses, Order, Myth” 681). Epic has had a troubled existence in the twentieth century, as either an “inflexible master discourse” in Bakhtin’s terms, or, through Benjamin’s storyteller, an “irrecoverable past” (Beissinger et al. 4–6). Reed Way Dasenbrock notes the “bad press” (248) epic has had during the modern era of “a century of decolonization” (251), and perhaps epic’s worst publicity comes from Pound and the “moral morass” (261) of *The Cantos*. Sollors, however, suggests the significance of epic for ethnic literature: “the epic, which is generally associated with ethnogenesis, the emergence of a people, and can therefore seemingly be appropriated transnationally by all peoples” (238).

(10.) In “Coordinates of Asian American Poetry,” Uba emphasizes the diversity of forms and themes in Asian American poetry; we may read his call for “redirection” in this context, which argues for greater heterogeneity.

(11.) Wong’s assertion that a “single controlling authority” presides over the modernist long poem can be problematized in several different ways—perhaps most notably in the indeterminacy of *The Cantos*, whose fragmentary final pages undermine the notion of an authoritarian voice.

(12.) Stefans refers to Wong’s discussion of Cha’s generic combat and takes a more pragmatic view: “Cha was not approaching literature from the angle of one invested in various subversions of tradition but rather as a filmmaker, and hence she takes a more anthropological view of writing genres, remaining free of ideological battles” (53).
(13.) Iriye explains that Roosevelt “was convinced that the Japanese first of all wanted to concentrate on continental affairs, staking out their sphere of interests. Only when their appetites were satiated would they turn eastward and southward to confront the United States. ‘So long as Japan takes an interest in Korea, in Manchuria, in China,’ wrote Roosevelt in December 1904, ‘it is Russia which is her natural enemy’ “ (108).

(14.) See Cho for a compelling discussion of this moment (88).

(15.) In “Unnaming the Same,” Wong discusses the coercive nature of dictation revealed in this passage (119-120).

(16.) In addition to the occasional Latin phrase, Chinese characters figure prominently in the text: pages 26 and 27 are each devoted to a single character, one denoting mother and the other, father. As Naoki Sakai points out, Chinese characters have an indeterminate nationality; they are part of several different national languages and they are “registered in graphic visuality” (26). Indeed, these Chinese characters have an exilic presence in Korean.

(17.) Lowe discusses the parallels between blood and ink (Immigrant Acts 109-112). Shu-mei Shih elaborates on this notion of writing as bleeding, connecting it to the “ritual of ‘blood writing’ conducted by Korean revolutionaries” (154).

(18.) Mark Jefferys discusses the “conventional description of lyric as a solitary voice that ‘speaks out of a single moment in time’“ (198). His essay argues against assigning an ideology to lyric, which corresponds to the failure of scholars of modernist literature to find a form that matches a political valence.

(19.) My translation.

(20.) Eun Kyung Min discusses the ungrammatical English of Dictée as an illustration of the attempt “to recuperate the experience of the foreignness of a language” (315).

(21.) Wong provides this translation in “Unnaming the Same” and discusses the origins of this photograph (107).

(22.) From Lattimore’s translation (173).

(23.) Shih discusses this Korean myth of Princess Pali (156).
(24.) Indeed, the notion of language as itself an agent pervades her work; in an essay on Kim's poetics, Joseph Jonghyun Jeon argues that “Kim’s poetry attempts to dramatize not how a foreign speaker learns to speak the native language of a new place but how the languages themselves learn to speak each other” (127). Jeon emphasizes Kim's “attempts to re-imagine English as if it were Hangul and Hangul as if it were English” (128).

(25.) See chapter 1 for a discussion of Pound's poem.