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Narrating Chaos: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* and Korean American Fragmentary Writings

Abstract: In *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, sociologist Arthur Frank uses narratology to typologize the stories people tell about illness. Next to teleological stories of survival, which “reassure the listener that however bad things look, a happy ending is possible”, Frank discusses “the chaos narrative” in which “events are told as the storyteller experiences life: without sequence or discernible causality” (97). While the storytellers discussed by Frank mostly suffer from physical ailments and traumas, I would argue that the chaotic mode of telling also characterizes texts that explore other kinds of traumas, including those related to displacement and shaming experienced by several generations of Koreans and Americans of Korean descent. Drawing on affect studies, I analyze Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE* (1982) alongside two essays, by Grace M. Cho and Hosu Kim published in *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007), all of which use the collage form to challenge the expectation that “in life as in story, one event [leads] to another” (Frank 97). The speech act is foregrounded in all three texts; it is de-naturalized, deformed, shown as a recitation of prescribed language, and repeatedly interrupted. Nonetheless, as Frank suggests, “the physical act becomes the ethical act” because “to tell one's life is to assume responsibility for that life.” It also allows others to “begin to speak through that story” (xx–xxi).

Keywords: Korean American literature, affect, chaos narrative, fragmentary writing, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *DICTEE*

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's¹ enigmatic book *DICTEE* was published by a small New York press in 1982. In the first two decades following its publication it tended

¹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha was born in South Korea in 1951. In 1962, her family emigrated to Hawaii and then moved again in 1968 to San Francisco, where Cha attended a Catholic high school. She received a BA in comparative literature at UC Berkeley in 1973, an MA in art in 1977, and an MFA in 1978. While studying literature, art, and film at Berkeley, she created numerous performance pieces. In 1976, the year her first video was screened in at the UC Berkeley Art Museum,

to baffle or alienate most readers, although several literary critics did try to make sense of this textual collage through the lenses of postcolonial, feminist, and psychoanalytic theories. They translated into English the passages Cha wrote in French, Latin, and Korean; they deciphered the Korean graffiti on the frontispiece, traced the origins of the uncaptioned photographs, diagrams, and quotations, and spotted Cha's deliberate appropriations and substitutions; they noted analogies between the construction of *DICTEE* and filmic montage (not an unexpected technique given the fact that Cha studied film in Berkeley and Paris).

Because *DICTEE* came out at the height of multiculturalism, when American publishers strongly favoured ethnic autobiographies, Cha's early readers expected this Korean American book to function on some level as an autobiography. Evidently anticipating this kind of reception, Cha simultaneously invoked and thwarted the generic conventions of ethnic autobiography, a practice some critics would later recognize as both postcolonial and postmodern.² Sifting through the shards contained between the covers of *DICTEE*, critics sought overarching narratives of national/ethnic identity and/or traces of mother–daughter bonding, usually at the expense of other shards that did not fit the pattern. The poetic language of Cha's work evokes associations with the modernist verse of T. S. Eliot and Gertrude Stein, but her minority perspective and the use of mixed media link her with the postmodern feminist *avant garde*, a fact noted by Shelly Sun Wong (1994), among others.

American scholars of poetry grappled with *DICTEE* much more successfully than the scholars of ethnic prose. But the most comprehensive account of Cha as a writer, visual artist, and performer can be found in the *The Dream of the Audience: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha (1951–1982)* edited by Constance Lewallen et al. The volume includes a personal tribute titled “White Spring” by the Vietnamese American scholar and avant-garde filmmaker Trinh Minh-ha, who collaborated with Cha and whose groundbreaking postcolonial study, *Woman, Native, Other* (1989) shares many features with *DICTEE*. Like Cha, Minh-ha challenged her readers' expectations of narrative coherence and generic stability. Although clearly addressing academics in the social sciences and humanities, Minh-ha affronted them with a multiplicity of genres and voices, one of which is a prophetic voice reminiscent of *DICTEE*'s *disease*. Where the reader would expect ethnographic images of generic Third-World women, Minh-ha inserts artistic portrait photographs that arrest the

Cha traveled to Paris to study at the *Centre d'Études Américaines du Cinéma*. After returning to the US she was an artist-in-residence at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, taught video art at Elizabeth Seton College, worked in the design department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and then became editor and writer at Tanam Press. She was raped and murdered in 1982 (Chew 52–56).

² See for example Anne Anlin Cheng, “Memory and Anti-Documentary Desire in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*” (1998) and Sue-Im Lee, “Suspicious Characters: Realism, Asian American Identity, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*” (2002). The most significant European interpretation of *DICTEE* is Kirsten Twelbeck's book-length study published in German in 2002, *No Korean is Whole—Wherever He or She May Be: Erfindungen von Korean America seit 1965*.

eye and individualize the subjects as well still lifes (including one of a dead donkey). Minh-ha and Cha must have reveled in the freedom afforded by the aesthetics of fragmentation, and they must have encouraged each other to “speak in tongues”. Yet this aesthetics made their texts unintelligible to publishers. Minh-ha recalls her disheartening experience of receiving rejection after rejection from academic, militant, feminist, and small presses alike, because of the “impurity ... the disrespectful mixing of theoretical, militant and poetical modes of writing” in *Woman, Native, Other* (Minh-ha, *Framer Framed* 154). *DICTEE* was originally brought out by Tanam Press, which existed just seven years and published twenty-one books, four of them by its founder, Reese Williams.

Even now, almost four decades after its publication, *DICTEE* obstinately withholds meaning. Although dozens of academic publications on *DICTEE* came out in the 2000s, an interpretation in which the pieces of the collage fall into place is unlikely to emerge because the book is riddled with highly personal lyrical passages, whose significance the author cannot reveal because she died in tragic circumstances several days after *DICTEE* was published. Among the recurrent explanations for Cha's use of collage³ is that fragmentation on the formal level reflects the impossibility of piecing together a coherent story about the lives of Koreans, repeatedly disrupted by European and Japanese imperialism, civil war, and the Cold War that severed Korea in two, leading to the displacement of large populations. Brutalized by Japanese soldiers, “liberated” by Americans and Soviets, caught in the vice of Cold War politics, Koreans experienced multiple traumas. Those in the diaspora⁴ additionally experienced the loss of homeland, mother tongue, and social status—losses many passed over in silence, transmitting their melancholia to subsequent generations.⁵ Building on this already familiar claim, I propose to read *DICTEE* as an illness or trauma narrative like those explored by Arthur W. Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics* (1995). Narratology offered Frank a way of categorizing the stories people tell about illness. Next to teleological stories of survival, which “reassure the listener that however bad things look, a happy ending is possible,” Frank discusses “the chaos narrative” in which “events are told as the storyteller experiences life: without sequence or discernible causality” (97). While *The Wounded Storyteller* explored the ways in which the experience of medical conditions resonates in literature, Frank's insights about the

³ For an early interpretation of *DICTEE* that pays attention to form see Shelley Sun Wong, “‘Unnaming the Same’: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*” (1994).

⁴ In 2004, *Amerasia Journal* assessed experience of the Korean diaspora around the world. The result was an issue titled *What Does It Mean to Be Korean Today*. Particularly Ramsay Liem's essay “History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans” resonates with *DICTEE*.

⁵ For analyses of *DICTEE* as an expression of melancholia see Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (2001) and Jennifer Cho, “Melancholia as Political Practice in Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *DICTEE*” (2011).

fragmented mode of telling can be extended to literature about traumas that fall beyond the purview of medicine.

DICTEE invites such a reading because of its many references to the vulnerable human body (“dismembered”, “maimed”, “blue-black”, and exposed to bullets), as well as to the body as either speechless or equipped with a “broken tongue”. Fracture is not just an aesthetic principle in *DICTEE* but also its key theme. I want to consider *DICTEE* as an instance of the “chaos narrative [which is] probably the most embodied form of story ... told on the edges of a wound ... on the edges of speech. Ultimately, chaos is told in the silences that speech cannot penetrate or illuminate,” for the lived experience of chaos, Frank tells us, “can never be told; it is the hole in the telling” (101–102). When illness strikes, the conventional stories people tell themselves about their lives are interrupted (60). Ill people attempt to reorder their expectations by telling teleological stories of restitution, stories of the chaos that overwhelms them, quest narratives of illness as a journey to (self)knowledge, or else a combination of these story types. Although the focus of this paper is *DICTEE*, in the conclusion I will attempt to show that the aesthetics of fragmentation continues to appeal to those Korean Americans who feel compelled to write about their individual and group experience, despite the conflicting discourses about the past and countless gaps in historical knowledge.

The distance between illness and the condition of being an immigrant or postcolonial subject is not as great as it might seem. Frank himself draws an analogy between the patient’s predicament in relation to medicine and the colonial subject’s relation to colonial authority: “Just as political and economic colonialism took over geographic areas, modernist medicine claimed the body of its patient as its territory” (10). Medicine generally wants to be seen as benevolent, yet it turns people into patients and submits them to its regimes (11). To exist as a science, medicine needs anonymous docile bodies as statistical evidence (12). While furthering the goals of science, medical discourse silences the patient, erasing individual suffering. Conversely, postcolonial critics deploy medical concepts like trauma and melancholia to interpret historical and literary texts. The unpredictability of the patient’s life parallels that of the migrant. To bring out this analogy, Frank invokes Susan Sontag’s metaphor of illness as travel between the country of the well and the country of the ill, pointing out that the patient in remission remains “on a permanent visa status, that visa requiring renewal” (9). Consequently, both the cancer patient and the postcolonial immigrant may find it difficult to tell a teleological story to themselves and to others.

* * *

DICTEE is composed of quotations, uncaptioned images, letters, and ventriloquized voices, interspersed with what appear to be Cha’s reconstructions of history, memories, dreams, and parables. As such, the book benefits from being approached

from the formal perspective of fragmentary writing. Like diggers who come across pottery shards at archeological sites, readers of fragmentary writing expect to be able to rearrange the shards into a meaningful whole, if not a well-wrought urn. In *DICTEE*, however, some fragments do not fit. The discomfort and disorientation that accompanies every reading were clearly intended by the author, who herself must have felt disoriented, over and over again, as a child-witness of a brutal civil war, as an immigrant learning to speak English in the United States, as a schoolgirl studying the Catechism, French, and Latin, and as a graduate student in France.

Some efforts to impose structure on the material and inscribe the book into an existing tradition are evident. Nine Greek muses give their names to the nine sections of *DICTEE*.⁶ But the connection between the specific muses and the section contents are nominal: together with Sappho, the muses are clearly invoked as guiding spirits that authorize speech, but the speech comes out broken and lacking a central narrative consciousness. Also, while ostensibly paying homage to Greek mythology, Cha violates tradition by inserting a made-up muse, *ELITERE*, instead of the original *EUTERPE*.

Four languages—Korean, French, English, and Latin (in the order of appearance)—make parts of the text intelligible to some readers but not to others. Cha thematizes her discomfort with all four tongues, particularly with the way they function not as means of self-expression but as vehicles of ideologies. Where ideas from one language are rendered in another, subtle shifts of meaning can be detected. Innocuous schoolroom dictation is never very far from dictatorship, Cha seems to be implying. When the subject does attempt to speak her own mind, she often can only do so in sentence fragments, because her language skills and speech apparatus are inadequate to the task.

According to Frank, chaos narratives emerge when the loss of agency is experienced as “being swept along, without control, by life’s fundamental contingency ... [which is] not exactly accepted; rather, it is taken as inevitable” (102). Internalizing the experience of chaos, bodies themselves become “contingent, monadic, lacking desire, and dissociated” (104), without giving up attempts to communicate. But “the voice that might express deepest chaos is subsumed in interruptions, interrupting itself as it seeks to tell” (105). Chaos stories thus tend to lack continuity and linearity, narrative order and causality, a clear genesis, and a sense of the future. Difficult to absorb, chaos narratives rarely find listeners. They may not even be recognized as stories, for audiences tend to valorize recognizable stories told in recognizable genres. Frank argues that chaos narratives must be heard as valid and revealing testimony, no matter how taxing they might be for the hearer. Yet even he implicitly privileges stories driven by continuity, those he calls “quest narratives”, told by bodies that are dyadic rather than monadic, accepting of

⁶ “In its classical references, *Dictee* deliberately invokes and troubles the boundaries between personal lyric and national epic; it also questions the divide between the moment of the lyric and the developmentalism of the autobiography” (Sue J. Kim 168).

contingency, and bent on learning from the illness experience. Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journals* (1980) is his prime example. Chaos narratives, sandwiched in his book between (naïve) teleological stories of restitution and (mature) quest narratives like Lorde's, may be interesting, but they are unproductive, Frank suggests. Yet *DICTEE* has been very productive in pushing academics and their students to think critically about how the individual relates to the historical process, how the vulnerable raced and gendered body relates to society, and what it means to be multilingual due to contingency rather than by choice.

Non-academic readers, however, have, by and large, rejected *DICTEE* in the same way that family members and friends refuse to listen to chaos narratives told by ill people, demanding instead teleological stories that culminate in the restoration of health, or at least turn suffering into a source of wisdom.⁷ Like Frank's "wounded storytellers", immigrant writers in the United States have been appreciated and listened to mostly when they tell "quest narratives"—stories that testify to having moved from unlivable homelands to America, the adoptive homeland where, after a period of turbulent adaptation, harmony ensues.⁸

If we consider the historical moment when *DICTEE* was published, it becomes apparent that, in attempting to tell a story about Korea to Americans, Cha faced the task of addressing an audience that knew the country only as the backdrop of *M*A*S*H*, a popular TV series showing the Korean war from the perspective of well-meaning American medical personnel treating (mostly white) wounded soldiers on a military base. Why the soldiers were fighting in Korea and who else was involved in the war was left unexplained, so that viewers could enjoy the comedy. Given the fact that *M*A*S*H* had been running on American television for ten seasons by the time *DICTEE* came out, it seems reasonable that Cha did not attempt to engage the broad American reading public, choosing instead to address those few readers who had a high tolerance for chaos.

The connection between illness and the predicament of the displaced colonial subject has been made by Anne Anlin Cheng (2001) and Jennifer Cho (2011). Both critics treat *DICTEE* as an expression of melancholia or ethnic malaise, or "a state of psychological sickness that Asian immigrants experience due to the awareness of both their alien presence and their lack of symbolic capital" (Palumbo-Liu qtd. in

⁷ Among the best-known Korean American texts about successful (if not smooth) integration into the American society are: Younghill Kang's *East Goes West* (1937), Kim Ronyoung's *Clay Walls* (1987), Mary Paik Lee's memoir *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* (1990), and Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* (1995). For an overview of Korean American literature see Elaine Kim, "Roots and Wings" (2004).

⁸ In *Trailing Clouds: Immigrant Fiction in Contemporary America* (2006) David Cowart valorizes immigrant fiction which has the virtue of exposing in ethnographic detail the immigrants' exotic (but unlivable) homelands from the perspective of assimilated American subjects (209). For a critique of Cowart's approach to minority literatures see Dominika Ferens, *Ways of Knowing Small Places: Intersections of American Literature and Ethnography since the 1960s*, pp. 129–134.

Cho 41). Cheng and Cho recognize symptoms of a lingering trauma that is both personal and collective, affecting those who share a cultural memory. According to Cho,

Cha implicates the U.S. in various traumatic moments of the Korean peninsular past, from its colonization to its (post)war history. As these tangled histories of domination and suppression are remembered, Cha withholds the kind of narrative and psychological closure that would enable readers to see traumatic Korean history as past, or overcome. (42)

While psychoanalytic theories help to explain why Cha was unwilling or unable to produce a linear text with closure, Frank's discussion of illness narratives throws light on *DICTEE* as a collection of utterances, blank spaces, and images that constantly disrupt one another.

On the sentence level many passages in *DICTEE* mimic stuttering, uncertain speech that consists of sentence fragments. Here are examples taken from different parts of the book:

I write. I write you. Daily. From here. If I am not writing, I am thinking about writing. I am composing. Recording movements. You are here I raise the voice. Particles bits of sound and noise gathered pick up lint and dust. They might scatter and become invisible. Speech morsels. Broken chips of stones. Not hollow not empty. (56)

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

One by one.
The sounds. The sounds that move at a time
stops. Starts again. Exceptions
stops and starts again
all but exceptions.
Stop. Start. Starts.
Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.
Cracked tongue. Broken tongue.
Pidgeon [*sic*]. Semblance of speech. (75)

The last of the three excerpts is printed opposite a set of four diagrams showing the human respiratory tract responsible for speech. While most people speak and breathe simultaneously, without being aware of the complex work performed by their internal organs, relying on unconditional reflexes overlaid with acquired linguistic competence, sometimes the apparatus malfunctions in the case of non-native speakers, people with speech impediments, and those who are shocked or shamed into silence. At the end of the book Cha returns to the theme of speaking/writing as acts of witnessing (160) that save the mind and body from dissolution, from disappearance into the background:

Maimed. Accident. Stutters. Almost a name. Half a name. Almost a place. Starts. About to. Then stops. Exhale swallowed to a sudden arrest. Pauses. How vast this page. Stillness, the page. Without. Can do without rests. Pause. Without them. All. Stop start ... Your speech as ransom. You crumple and sift by each handful the last enduring particle. Hands buried to earth dissolved to the same dust. And you wait. Still. Having bartered away your form, now you are formless. Blind. Mute. Given to stillness to whiteness only too still. Waiting. Scribe. Diving. In whiteness beyond matter. Sight/Speech. (159, italics in the original)

The technique of interruption visible at the sentence and paragraph level extends to the text as a whole. It begins with the frontispiece which shows a grainy photograph of an inscription in Korean characters on a rough surface. Scholars have identified the inscription as graffiti left by a Korean forced labourer in a Japanese mine during World War II. The graffiti reads: “Mother/ I miss you/ I am hungry/ I want to go home.” On the first numbered page of the book we find a transcribed dictation in French, with all the verbal commands and punctuation marks written out in words, disrupting the text. A literal translation into English follows. In this “dictée” someone who has come from “a far” is being asked to describe her “first day” (1). A blank page follows. On page 3, titled DISEUSE (French for female speaker), the speaker, described in the third person fails to perform the assignment. Pages 3 to 5 are a record of her stops and starts. Following another blank page is an invocation to a nameless Muse, daughter of Zeus, to “tell me the story/ Of all these things ... / Beginning wherever you wish” (7). Whatever “all these things” are, they have no identifiable genesis, and the order of their telling is irrelevant. All these are features of the chaos narrative, as described by Frank. As can be expected of a chaos narrative, what follows is not a revelation but a disappointment: two more pages of textbook exercises designed to teach French to English speakers through the translation method, followed by another invocation—an account of a Catholic ritual performed on Ash Wednesday—then some more French exercises and a Catechism lesson, all the way to page 19. This is a representative sample of various languages and discourses interrupting one another and frustrating the reader’s expectation that a story will emerge if only he or she reads attentively enough.

Eventually several stories do emerge out of the fragments. One is an account of the brief life of a Korean girl revolutionary, Yu Guan Soon. Another story tells of the speaker’s Korean’s mother exiled by the Japanese to Manchuria, forced to learn Japanese, and then to teach Japanese to Korean children. Yet another story describes the speaker’s disappointing trip from the United States to Korea, which is now under a military regime. Towards the end of the book we find a dream-like parable about a young girl meeting a woman at a well and receiving a gift of medicine for her sick mother.

Interspersed among the fragments of prose and poetry are black-and-white photographs which might function as historical documents, but Cha stopped short of placing them in a spatial and temporal context by means of captions. This suggests she may have wanted the reader to see them as symbolic and universal. One shows an execution. Another—a crowd of open-mouthed Korean faces staring in

awe or horror at something outside the frame, their lips forming inaudible words. Stubbornly, the text resists our desire to know. It resists teleology, repeating over and over the cycle of a call to witnessing, followed by broken speech that fails to deliver intelligible testimony of suffering. Whereas Robert Frost, confronted with chaos, holds up poetry as “a momentary stay against confusion” that leaves the reader with a limited “clarification” (Preface to *Collected Poems*), Cha begins and ends with confusion.

I would argue that Cha's way of witnessing “on the edges of a wound . . . on the edges of speech” (to use Frank's vivid words) in an impersonal voice interrupted by the voices of others allowed her to avoid the mode of complaint. While studying at the University of California, Berkeley, in the 1970s, she cannot have been unaware of the novelist and creative writing instructor Maxine Hong Kingston, whose *The Woman Warrior* (1976) was enthusiastically received by scholars in the emerging Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies.⁹ Like Cha, Kingston encountered gaps and silences in her family history and in the history of the Chinese diaspora, yet she chose to narrate over those gaps by resorting to myth, fantasy, and library research on Chinese culture. Cha may have styled *DICTEE* as a deliberate antithesis of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, yet the two books do have something in common: the compulsion to testify—without complaining—about the suffering of a diasporic group. Kingston once received dubious praise from a reviewer: “though it is drenched in alienation, *The Woman Warrior* never whines” (Gray 9). Neither does *DICTEE*. Any suffering it refers to is beyond the picture frame.

Frank affirms the need for chaos narratives because any telling of an illness narrative enables others. Cha has played such an enabling role for writers of a younger generation, Hosu Kim and Grace M. Cho, whose experimental essays appear in the collective volume *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (2007) edited by Patricia Ticineto Clough and Jean Halley. Cha is quoted in both as a foremother and enabler. Significantly, since the publication of *DICTEE*, previously undocumented or unspeakable episodes in Korean history were revealed. Exposed to new knowledge, each generation suddenly becomes aware of silences in family and communal stories and of the cost of maintaining them. Hence the continuing usefulness of collage for dealing with knowledge gaps, incompatible discourses, and multiple speaking positions. In the 1980s, Cha contended with the erasure of Japan's colonization of Korea from the American public discourse and with her family's refusal to discuss the traumatic past. Hosu Kim and Grace M. Cho speak about Korea's role as a site of the Soviet/US Cold War conflict and about the fact that American neocolonization replaced Japanese colonial rule.

Cho was also among many Korean Americans who discovered the history of the so-called “comfort women”—Korean women forced by Japanese soldiers to

⁹ A decade later, *The Woman Warrior* was being assigned “by instructors in some twelve departments, ranging from Comparative Literature . . . Rhetoric, History . . . to Ethnic Studies” (Chun qtd. in Chua 113).

serve as sex workers. After World War II, some of the “comfort women”, shunned by their communities, found themselves pressed into serving American soldiers in about 100 settlements on the fringes of American military bases in South Korea. Eventually some of these sex workers, including Cho’s mother, became “Korean military brides” and migrated with their husbands to the United States.

Kim uses the technique of fragmentation to render the confusion caused by “a foreign student’s loss of verbal capacity, a mother’s memory of the Korean War, and a mother’s loss of memory about the baby she left behind.” A Korean adoptee raised in the United States, she clearly finds poetic language more appropriate than academic prose for expressing “the losses and pains in displaced tongues and disjointed bodies” (34). Like Cha, Kim problematizes English as a neocolonial language:

Maybe I can go over there and study
The power of English is a guarantor of your success
The ability to speak English is directly tied to the power of America. (38)

Cho, in turn, researches the gaps in her family history in response to a North Korean feature film, *Soul’s Protest*, about the killing of Korean forced laborers and their children by the Japanese after World War II.

The living souls haunt a history that is perforated by attempts to erase it and the left to die along with its witnesses ... Those holes in history come to be lived as “transgenerational haunting,” what Nicholas Abrams and Maria Torok describe as the phenomenon of an unspeakable trauma passed unconsciously from one generation to the next. (156)

Historical research helped Cho to understand her mother’s mental illness as a consequence of her having been a “comfort woman” and then a “military bride” transplanted to the United States.¹⁰

All three Korean American narratives discussed above suggest that trauma is not solely a personal issue, the effect of an external blow too painful to fully understand, and therefore relived over and over again as an affective disorder. Instead, they link individual suffering with the political and the social. In so doing, they contradict Michael Rothberg’s claim that the psychoanalytic model of trauma, invested in “fragmented modernist aesthetics”, is oblivious to systemic factors that may be sources of trauma (Rothberg qtd. in Philippi). As used in these writings, the “fragmented modernist aesthetic” has allowed Korean American authors to connect individual experience to the geopolitical.

¹⁰ In an interview Cho explains: “the inspiration for the new project also comes from my mom. ... Haunting the Korean Diaspora demands that we look at ‘Korean military brides,’ the women who are often shunned by their families and communities, who are kept hidden in the shadows. In some ways my mother’s experiences were like that, too. She spent a long period of her life suffering from the long-term effects of trauma and couldn’t function well enough to be a so-called ‘productive member of society.’ The way our society deals with both mental illness and historical trauma is to just not look at it, and treat it as if it’s not really there, and then benefits from that invisibility” (Park).

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