CHAPTER TWO

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and the Politics of Form

Literary forms have to be checked against reality, not against aesthetics—even realist aesthetics.

—Bertolt Brecht

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s 1982 experimental novel, *Dictee*, has become a key text in Asian American studies, particularly as the locus for contemporary methodologies in the field. Korean American filmmaker, writer, and performance artist Cha developed her work in the California and New York avant-garde art communities of the late 1960s through the 1970s, then studied semiology in France before returning to the United States to teach and continue her work (Roth 151–60). In 1981, she published the film anthology, *Apparatus: Cinematographic Apparatus*; including pieces from theorists and artists ranging from Dziga Vertov and Maya Deren, to Roland Barthes, Christian Metz, and Cha herself, the anthology examines the ideological processes of the filmic apparatus. Following her tragic death, her novel *Dictee* was published in 1982. After nearly a decade of neglect by scholars in Asian American Studies, as Shelley Wong notes, in the early 1990s, the poststructuralist turn in the field enabled and was spurred on by the novel’s interrogation of form, subjectivity, and ideology (Wong 103–6). Since then, numerous studies of the political significance of *Dictee* have appeared. While some readers choose to emphasize the cultural specificity of the text, many critics focus on the ways in which the narrative disruptions of the novel constitute political disruptions of ideological narratives and formations.

Lisa Lowe’s influential book, *Immigrant Acts*, best exemplifies the argument that *Dictee’s* formal disruptions interrogate the multiple,
sometimes contradictory configurations of the ideological apparatuses of state, church, neo-imperialism, patriarchy, and other structures of power. If mimetic realism ideologically “resolves” social contradictions by convincing readers of the ability to equate “the name and the thing,” in contrast, the “discontinuity, fragmentation, and episodic unfluency” of Dictee undercut this ideological function (Lowe 152). She writes, “Dictee makes explicit that every social formation includes a multiplicity of social contradictions—of race, national origin, ethnicity, gender, or class—arising from heterogeneous origins and conditions, with certain conditions taking priority over others at particular historical moments” (147). Such readings emphasize that the novel challenges not only certain representations, such as Orientalist historical texts, hagiography, patriotic legends of martyrdom, and the interpretative processes of U.S. citizenship, but also the ideological innocence of any process of signification, including narrative, translation, dictation, collective identification, reading, and writing. In such “reading framework[s],” Sue-Im Lee explains, Dictee is celebrated as “suggestive of a new form of Asian American subject representation, a postmodern, anti-realist subject whose empirical substantiality is not generated through the ‘intelligible whole’ of plot nor whose social identity is categorizable within ascriptive terms of the majority culture” (242). Other critics, while acknowledging the novel’s formal resemblance to other postmodern texts, argue that Dictee’s primary political significance lies in its recovery of specific histories, contexts, and experiences. In her contribution to the 1994 collection of essays on Dictee, Writing Self, Writing Nation (which also included an early version of Lowe’s essay on Cha), Elaine Kim notes that Cha “foregrounds a highly specific cultural context, inserting Korea, Korean women, and Korean Americans into the discourse” (“Poised” 8); in a more recent essay, Kim numbers Dictee among important Korean American texts that recover “subjugated knowledges” (“Myth” 91). Likewise, Helena Grice argues that although the novel undoubtedly employs postmodern narrative strategies, Cha’s “primary project” is “creating a Korean (American) national identity which is gendered” (44). In response, others characterize such claims of “cultural ownership” as “highly irritating” (Twelbeck 227).

Analyses foregrounding form or content are not mutually exclusive; rather, critical readings tend to emphasize one aspect or another. But while readers generally agree that the formal disruptions of the text constitute some kind of political resistance, there is fundamental difference about where to place the emphasis: is it Dictee’s challenging