The Limits of Thinking Theory: Responding to the Theory/Practice Debate in Asian American Studies
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To begin. “This is a period of anxiety and change in Asian American Studies” write Michael Omi and Dana Takagi in their introduction to *Thinking Theory*. They assert that “shifts in racialization fueled by global and national economic restructuring and the rise of conservative political movements, far-reaching demographic changes in the Asian American population over the past twenty-five years, and the shifting terrain of academic disciplinary boundaries have precipitated a dramatic rethinking of the field’s paradigmatic assumptions.” Although *Thinking Theory* begins by positing shifts in material conditions as the source of anxiety, the editors soon identify theory as the cause of the current crisis. Rather than questioning the validity of paradigmatic assumptions, Omi and Tagaki argue that “New theoretical insights have problematized core areas of intellectual work; fundamental questions regarding positionality, interpretation, what constitutes evidence, and the claims made about the subject of inquiry have been raised. Such questioning of the intellectual enterprise can invigorate a field, or it can contribute to a level of paralysis.” In response to this crisis then—the editors call on “distinguished scholars to critically reflect on the contemporary state of theory in the field—to articulate how they deploy theory in their work and the ways in which they have rethought theory in response to shifting material conditions and new paradigmatic orientations.” Theory, then, moves from response to source of crisis.

These scholars’ responses to the contemporary state of theory basically divide into pro or anti theory camps, where theory is assumed to be of the postal variety. For
those arguing against theory, theory is a parasite on Asian American Studies. Growing at the expense of its host, it causes scholars to overlook the lived experiences of Asian Americans and instead to privilege rhetorical niceties. It dilutes the political efficacy of Asian American studies by loosening the ties between community and university, intellectual work and social responsibility. For instance, the historian Gordon Chang argues that, “While interest in postmodernism has encouraged the counterhegemonic effort by Asian American Studies to dissemble the intellectually dominant voice, it has also contributed, ironically and less positively, to a turn away from one of the other original and still basic purposes of Asian American Studies, that is, the effort to reclaim minority voice, to uncover the ‘buried past,’ to recover collective, lived experience. Postmodernism, because of its essentially skeptical nature, questions the very legitimacy of such efforts.” Here, collective lived experience lies dead and buried, while postmodernism, live and skeptical, conspires to seduce Asian American scholars away from practice. This sentiment is put more sympathetically by the literary critic Sauling Wong, who responds to the editor’s call by reflecting on the impact of postcolonial and/or diaspora studies on Asian American studies,¹ “She writes, “although I have been an early proponent of broadening Asian American literary studies to include immigrant works, which presupposes noteworthy continuities between Asian and Asian American historical experiences and cultural expression, I have found myself raising questions about the consequences of an uncritical participation in denationalization, as if it represented a more advanced and theoretically more sophisticated stage in Asian

American studies.” It would seem that Wong questions the recent turn to denationalization—or “travelling theory”—because this turn is portrayed as theoretically sophisticated. Later, however, she states that “even risking culpability of too legalistic a definition of ‘immigrant,’ or else too stern a denial of the immigrant’s psychic pain, I would like to insist on ‘claiming America,’ which was the focus of Asian American cultural politics for fifteen or twenty years after the Third World Student Strikes but is now being contested by denationalization.” New theoretical insights then not only turn Asian American Studies’ head from uncovering dead yet living experience, but also turn its head from America to Asia.

For those arguing for theory, theory is portrayed as a tool taken up in response to an increasingly diverse Asian American community. It allows scholars to address those initially excluded by cultural nationalism and allows scholars to make and remake alternative spaces within the university. According to the sociologist Lane Ryo Hirabayashi, “an essentialized, unproblematic definition of ‘the community’ was a typical operational assumption that has not worn well upon re-reading, given what we now recognize as on-going, internal class generation, political, gender and sexual divisions.”

Asian Americanists have moved away from cultural nationalism to theories of difference because cultural nationalism failed to take into account the diversity of lived experience. Postal theory allows for a more encompassing view of community and thus allows us to overcome past problems with community-based research projects. Put most pointedly by the literary critic Lisa Lowe, “it is history and historical necessity that have affected the shape of current Asian American projects, not the theoretical products of poststructuralism, Anglo-American feminism, or postcolonial theory….rather than
miscasting a reified notion of theory as having the exclusive power to change Asian American projects, we might more fruitfully conceive of various theories as ‘tools’ for use by situated materialist critiques that seek to grapple with the crises and consequences of shifts in material conditions.” Rather than untethering Asian American Studies from the material, theory then offers us a way to grapple with the crises and consequences of shifts in material conditions—that is, if it is used in situated materialist critiques. Lowe’s repetition of “materialist” reveals anxieties over and theory’s dangerous mobility.

In fact, what is striking about this debate is that both groups place theory—as parasite or tool—outside the core of Asian American Studies. Whereas Asian American studies is stable, theory is nomadic. Both sides seem to agree that theory tends to untether: the pro-theory side, though, believes that proper application of theory can root it sufficiently. Regardless, Asian American as content stays put; theory as methodology travels.

Anxieties over theory’s promiscuous mobility are further revealed in the curious slippage between theory and postcolonial/diaspora studies in Thinking Theory. Scholars not only substituted postcolonial studies for theory; they also represented postcolonial studies as solely theoretical. Let us return to Lisa Lowe’s explanation of the current interest in theory, “it is history and historical necessity that have affected the shape of current Asian American projects, not the theoretical products of poststructuralism, Anglo-American feminism, or postcolonial theory. The paralleling “isms” in Lowe’s sentence break at the prospect of postcolonialism: whereas other movements produce theoretical products, postcolonial theory—not postcolonialism, not decolonization—produces

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postcolonial theoretical products. The legal scholar Neil Gotanda, another supporter of 
theory, further denies postcolonial studies historical and political specificity by listing 
postcolonialism as another “postmodern understanding.” According to Gotanda, 
“exploration of postmodern understandings—interpretation, post-colonialism, and 
poststructuralism—provide the beginnings of legal analyses which can better describe 
and explain the current conditions of the Asian American.”3 Here postcolonial studies 
stands as an “ism,” but only in the service of better describing and explaining the Asian 
American. This separates postcolonial studies as a travelling theory from Asian 
American studies as a field rooted in identity and political and scholarly projects. To 
address the stakes of this separation of theory from field, abstraction from experience, 
dissemination from uncitability, I reverse these terms—“Asian American theory in 
postcolonial studies”—and ask why this reversal seems so jarring. Why not Asian 
American theory in postcolonial studies?

One answer might be that Asian Americans and Asian American studies are so 
diverse that an Asian American theory would be implausible, but postcolonials and 
postcolonial studies are at least equally diverse. Another answer might be that ‘Asian 
American’ unites a pan-ethnic group in their struggles and coalitions within a nation-
state, but ‘postcolonial’ does the same. Yet another answer might be that Asian 
American studies deal primarily with literary and autobiographical texts, but so do 
postcolonial studies and we still have postcolonial theory, so do literary studies and we 
still have literary theory. Why, then, does postcolonialism produce “theory” whereas 
Asian American studies do not? Why does Asian American studies, as it insists on 

historical and materialist critique, unintentionally deprive postcolonial studies of historical and materialist specificity through its vision of postcolonial studies as theory?

This separation of field and theory is not particular to Asian American studies. All fields with “American” in their names similarly separate theory from their core. We have African American literature and history, yet not African American theory. We have American literature and history, yet not American theory. Why? Why is theory French and postcolonial, but not American? In a country notorious for its dissemination of culture, this insistence on travelling theory as outside its purview seems disingenuous. Arguably, postcolonial studies are considered theoretical because colonialism was, and still is, theoretical, in that it justifies its mission epistemologically. Although colonial theory may have at one time seemed an anathema, recent work in postcolonial studies has revealed that colonialism is more than physical or political: it is a worldview. It sets up a *theoria*—a chosen group that witnesses an event and then propagates proper or legitimate explanations—against others—individual citizens, women and slaves—whose views are merely *aesthesis*.

Given America’s role as the last great superpower and the so-called McDonaldization of the world, America similarly enables a global worldview. This national refusal to claim theory—this insistence on America as untheoretical—supports America’s refusal to see itself as a colonial power: whereas other nations deliberately annex territories and create empires, America reluctantly invades other nations solely to enable global peace. This insistence on America as generating practice rather than theory also buttresses the American dream of self-reinvention and the American melting pot/salad bowl ideology. According to these theories, America consists of immigrants
who arrive as foreign nationals but then congeal into rooted (yet rootless) citizens.

Whereas other more “cultured” and class-ridden countries export people, America accepts people and, through the oath of citizenship, turns them perhaps into hyphenated Americans, but Americans nonetheless. Importantly, the view of America as experience, of America as outside theory, is itself theoretical. The theory/practice, theory/experience debate is a theory/theory debate, in which those arguing for practice or experience erase how their own work establishes a worldview or a set of common techniques or tools. By this, I do not mean that both sides of the equation are only theoretical or equal. I do mean that both sides offer competing accounts of and explanations for events that they have witnessed.

The stakes of this theoretical separation of postcolonial from Asian American, immigrant from citizen, comes out most poignantly in Bharati Mukherjee’s letter to the editor in *The New York Times* on September 22, 1996. Mukherjee, insisting on “lived experience,” addresses sweeping reforms to U.S. immigration laws through “a tale of two sisters from Calcutta, Mira and Bharati, who have lived in the United States for some 35 years, but who find themselves on different sides in the current debate over the status of immigrants.” Referring to the panicked mass naturalization of resident aliens, Mukherjee states that she is “moved that thousands of long-term residents are finally taking the oath of citizenship.” She is moved that others are being moved, and she reduces the debate over this bill (now become law) that deprives legal immigrants of their rights to a disagreement between two highly educated sisters who came to America in the sixties on student visas. Specifically, she describes their difference in terms of marrying America. Bharati Mukherjee not only married an American, she married America: she “embraced
the demotion from expatriate aristocrat to immigrant nobody, surrendering those thousands of years of ‘pure culture,’ the saris, the delightfully accented English.” Her sister Mira and others like her, on the other hand, refuse the oath of citizenship and therefore remain caught in “a loveless marriage of convenience,” unwilling to give themselves over to America. Responding to Mira’s belief that America has betrayed her by changing the rules mid-stream (according to Mira, these new immigration rules should just apply to new immigrants), Mukherjee asks, “have we the right to demand, and to expect, that we be loved? (That, to me, is the subtext of the arguments by immigration advocates.)” Equating welfare, social security and medicaid/care with love, she ends her letter by claiming, “the price that the immigrant willingly pays, and that the exile avoids, is the trauma of self-transformation.”

Begging the question of how India with its diverse ethnic population, with its history of colonialization and decolonization evidenced by the “delightfully accented English” represents “thousands of years of ‘pure culture,’” and begging the question of how Mukherjee’s becoming American marks her as a nobody, given that her American passport, rather than her Indian one, marks her as a somebody world-wide, and given that she has built her career, as she acknowledges, around the immigrant experience, her reduction of this debate to her personal experience coincides with anti-theorists privileging of lived experience. Further, her sister Mira’s decision to play the game, to use the tools of the master strategically conforms to the methods of the pro-theory pragmatists. These framings disregard the ways in which oaths of citizenship exceed

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4 “‘If America wants to play the manipulative game, I’ll play it too,’ she snapped. ‘I’ll become a U.S. citizen for now, then change back to Indian when I’m ready to go home.’”
personal choice, exceed choices of husbands or wives. It ignores how those not only less articulate than Mira, but also less fluent than her, cannot pass English examinations necessary for citizenship, and thus are deprived of services for which they have been paying taxes. Mukherjee, living in Iowa, privileges the experiences of the elite exile at the expense of those who want to become citizens but who are caught in or turned away from endless lines outside of Newark’s Federal Building that make it almost impossible for a working immigrant to apply for citizenship. She also privileges the experiences of her nationally-renowned sister at the expense of anonymous illegal immigrants who are necessary for the everyday operation of American agriculture and industry. Lastly, by denying the immigrant the trauma of self-transformation, she preserves the immigrant as outside the core of American individualism and experience: she displaces their pain outside of America.

Based on “real life,” then, Mukherjee proposes a theory of America rooted in heterosexual matrimony that erases the experiences of those unable to freely choose their country of citizenship, and erases the pain of immigrants. She does so unconsciously since, rather than positing a theory, she offers a rhetorical question that stands as her theory: “have we the right to demand, and to expect, that we be loved?” According to this logic, those who do not become citizens choose to be unloved and their experiences can reduced to those who fall into a marriage of convenience. Given the myth that most American-foreign marriages are marriages of convenience, are marriages designed to produce a green card, her reduction is especially harsh. Mira, on the other hand, argues that the theoretical and legal apparatuses in play have been changed without her consent. In order to make her experiences count, she must then play by the new rules. She must use
the new theory to root her experience in America. This theory/theory debate assumes that theory is a tool, or a means by which actions can be justified or explained.

As opposed to this pragmatist view of theory, I contend that theory cannot justify action or the (un)intended effects of an action. By this, I do not mean that theory is unnecessary or detrimental to action. I do mean that the rupture between cognition and action, between “theory” and “practice,” is precisely what generates theory. In other words, theory—seeing and telling—becomes necessary when it is imperative that we make sense of incalculable events. In this manner I link theory to responsibility, to the moments when we face responsibility. According to Thomas Keenan, “it is precisely when we do not know exactly what we should do, when the effects and conditions of our actions can no longer be calculated, and when we have nowhere else to turn, not even back to our ‘self,’ that we encounter something like responsibility.”5 In those moments of uncertainty, theory gets generated and, at the same time, theory’s inability to work as a set of rules governing practice or explaining practice gets inscribed.

To relate this view of responsibility to the theory/practice debate I have been discussing thus far, the material changes in the conditions of Asian Americans mark a moment of crisis in Asian American studies because the paradigmatic assumptions of Asian American studies can no longer account for Asian American experiences. Faced with this crisis, scholars then grapple with the role of theory in their work. However, by framing this crisis as a theory/practice debate and by limiting “theory” to a tool or a parasite, they avoid the collective encounter with responsibility. Theory—as a means for calculation—then becomes either an alibi or a culprit. This separation within Asian

American studies, amongst other American studies, between field and theory does three things: it allows “American studies” to remain rooted and untouched by moving crises; it allows the theoretical work of relating experiences to remain unmarked; and it reinscribes responsibility “as a matter of articulating what is known with what is done,” rather than the encounter with what is unknowable.  

To begin envisioning an Asian American theory that refuses to erase itself as theory and that does not allow Asian American studies to stand merely as an independent field, I turn to a literary text, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE*. I turn to an aesthetic text as part of a collective effort to move the work of theory away from a *theoria* (an official group of citizens) to *aesthesis* (the witnessing and narratives of individuals, women and slaves). I also turn to an aesthetic text to highlight the responsibility of reading, and to place my project as part of the many attempts within literary studies to produce theory. In response to texts that cannot be calculated, literary theorists from formalists to deconstructionists, from historicists to reader response critics, have attempted to render comprehensible the experience of reading.

2. THEORY BY OTHER MEANS

*We must know the limits of the narratives, rather than establish the narratives as solutions for the future, for the arrival of social justice, so that to an extent they’re working within an understanding of what they cannot do, rather than declaring war.*

--Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE* is a notoriously difficult text. Combining poetry, photographs, letters, dictation exercises, translations, screenplays and liturgies on the one

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hand, and English, French, Chinese characters and Korean (*hangul*) on the other, it defies classification and decipherment. Unlike “typical” immigrant texts that address immigrant and mainstream readerships as they relate experiences of assimilation and/or discrimination in first-person narratives, it garnered little critical response outside the New York and Berkeley art communities when Tanam Press first published it in 1982. Until the late eighties, Cha remained best known for *Apparatus*, a collection of essays that translated and introduced French film theory to the United States. However, several years after Cha’s tragic death only months after publishing *DICTEE*, museums such as the Whitney and UC Berkeley featured retrospectives on her work, critics outside of Asian American studies such as Priscilla Wald and Stephen Martin wrote about *DICTEE*, and prominent scholars inside Asian American studies such as Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe began arguing for *DICTEE*’s place within the Asian American canon.

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13 “Unfaithful to the Original,” *Writing Self, Writing Nation*. 
As part of Kim’s and Lowe’s efforts to canonize *DICTEE*, it was re-published in 1995 through Third Woman Press.

For scholars like Kim and Lowe, interest in *DICTEE* marks the switch from cultural nationalism to the politics of difference within Asian American studies and also marks the opportunity for Asian Americanist scholars to intervene on critical debates outside the field. Kim, in her introduction to a collection of essays on *DICTEE* entitled *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, argues:

“In 1990 . . . we [Elaine Kim, L. Hyun Yi Kang, Lisa Lowe and Shelley Sunn Wong] shared a sense of urgency about the need to bring Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s work to the attention of Asian Americans. Moreover, we wish to intervene in the published conversations about *DICTEE* just beginning among a number of contemporary critics who largely ignored or sidelined Korea and Korean America in their discussion of the book.”

*DICTEE*, then, allows scholars to perform the situated theoretical critique called for by pro-theory advocates in *Thinking Theory*: these critics borrow methods from poststructuralism and postcolonialism, but also focus on the specificity of Korean and Korean American experience. *Writing Self, Writing Nation* thus seeks to re-root postcolonialist scholarship on *DICTEE*. Shelley Sunn Wong, writing about an MLA presentation on *DICTEE*, contends that:

“What became apparent during the course of the presentation was the way in which radical critical paradigms (particularly those of colonial discourse theory) could be emptied of the historical and material specificity which grounds their critiques of colonial power, and subsequently introduced into circulation within an institutional setting as the currency of a new critical orthodoxy.”

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14 Elaine Kim, “Preface,” *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, ix.

15 “Unnaming the Same: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *DICTEE*,” *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, 135.
Against this empty circulation, the papers in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, produce smart readings that focus on Korean-American experiences of reading *DICTEE*, on the historical events that inform *DICTEE*, and on Cha’s re-working of Western modes of interpellation. Although I believe that these readings are crucial, I also contend that *DICTEE* exceeds any project to tether it to Korean and Korean American experiences. *DICTEE*, with its insistence on the impossibility of decipherment, on translation, and on the relationship between the literal and the metaphorical—between tenor and vehicle—refuses to remain rooted. Rather, it investigates and participates in circulation, citation and dissemination. I also contend that readings of *DICTEE* as exceeding Korean and Korean-American experiences are essential to debunking Orientalist readings of it by critics such as Michael Stephens who pin Cha and *DICTEE* within assumptions about Korean culture. Michael Stephens, who is married to a Korean, combines a narrative of his climb up Sorak-San—a famous Korean mountain—with a reading of the essential Korean-ness of *DICTEE*.

Critics and students alike have commented on the difficulty of reading *DICTEE*. Both Elaine Kim and L. Hyun Yi Kang begin their pieces by relating their initial hostile reactions to *DICTEE*: both dismissed it as an incomprehensible arty text that engaged traditions irrelevant to their then-immediate political goal of cultural nationalism. When I taught *DICTEE* in a class on American Women Writers, students similarly complained that it seemed incomprehensible and offered them no way into the text.

This frustration of the reader, as many have noted, is deliberate and focuses the reader on reading and speaking as process. *DICTEE* makes clear the pain of speaking and reading through the description of the painful attempts at speaking by the diseuse
(one of the ostensible narrators). Cha’s diseuse, rather than speaking fluently or beautifully, struggles to speak (italicized section on 3): “It murmurs inside. It murmurs. Inside is the pain of speech the pain to say. Larger still. Greater than is the pain not to say. To not say. Says nothing against the pain to speak. It festers inside. The wound, liquid, dust. Must break. Must void.” Cha, contrasting the pain of speaking to the pain of not speaking, portrays speech as an urgent act outside of one’s choice. The words do not entirely belong to the diseuse (middle of page 4): “She relays the others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering. Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them.” The form is not hers either (also on page 4): “She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver.” Through this graphic description of the actions that take place before speech, Cha exposes the physical and social apparatae that enable speech. She describes speaking as a painful personal process that immediately places one in a larger social and disciplinary realm. However, once her diseuse speaks, she spills speech; she “disuses” speech; she breaks English. She both services and breaks punctuation; she both delivers speech and mis-delivers it. She disseminates others’ words, but also disperses their words, destroying the correspondence on which dictation and translation rely. She confuses her readers in order to remind them of the difficulty of learning to speak, of learning a language. She describes the pain to speak and the pain of not speaking, portrays speech as an urgent act outside of one’s choice. The words do not entirely belong to the diseuse (middle of page 4): “She relays the others. Recitation. Evocation. Offering. Provocation. The begging. Before her. Before them.” The form is not hers either (also on page 4): “She would take on their punctuation. She waits to service this. Theirs. Punctuation. She would become, herself, demarcations. Absorb it. Spill it. Seize upon the punctuation. Last air. Give her. Her. The relay. Voice. Assign. Hand it. Deliver it. Deliver.” Through this graphic description of the actions that take place before speech, Cha exposes the physical and social apparatae that enable speech. She describes speaking as a painful personal process that immediately places one in a larger social and disciplinary realm. However, once her diseuse speaks, she spills speech; she “disuses” speech; she breaks English. She both services and breaks punctuation; she both delivers speech and mis-delivers it. She disseminates others’ words, but also disperses their words, destroying the correspondence on which dictation and translation rely. She confuses her readers in order to remind them of the difficulty of learning to speak, of learning a language. She describes the pain to speak and the pain

\[16\] DICTEE. Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1995. 4. Cha’s emphasis.

\[17\] 4.

\[18\] 4. Cha’s emphasis.
not to speak in order to expose how speaking, especially speaking in the language of the colonizer, is something that one cannot not want or need.

However, recognizing that Cha “disuses” language in order to make the reader aware of reading and speaking as painful, culturally-ridden processes only begins the discussion. *DICTEE*, I argue, seems incomprehensible not because it gives the readers no way to organize their readings, but rather because it offers too many ciphers. *DICTEE* spills ciphers all over the text, while at the same time pointing out their limitations through relentless overlapping.

The nine muses, with Sappho as a tenth, most obviously organize *DICTEE*. (see handout). Each “story” within *DICTEE* seems to follow the theme of the revised muses. Trying to make the stories and images fit with the muses offers one way into the text. It allows one to comprehend the ways Cha revises Western classical notions of authorship and genre, and the ways she refuses to limit experiences to the personal or individual. Within Erato/Love Poetry, she cites passages from the autobiography of St. Therese de Lisieux, specifically the “fake” wedding invitation St. Therese wrote for her initiation and the burning love poetry to God for which St. Therese was canonized. St. Therese, composing her narrative on exercise books as she was dying, writes (middle of 111) “Love has chosen me as a holocaust, me, a weak and imperfect creature. Is not this choice worthy of Love? Yes, in order that Love be fully satisfied, it is necessary that It lower itself, and that It lower Itself to nothingness and transform this nothingness into fire.”¹⁹ By placing St. Therese’s autobiography within love poetry, Cha exposes the desire for self-destruction that religious Love demands. By doing so, she also links St.

¹⁹ 111.
Therese’s desire for Love with Cha’s own desire for absolution that Cha includes in the introductory section. Following the rote of confession, she confesses that “I am making up the sins. For the guarantee of absolution. In the beginning again, at zero. Before the Fall. All previous wrongs erased. Reduced to spotless. Pure. When I receive God, all pure.”20 Through the white spaces that dominate the pages in this section, she links spotlessness to virginity and to “receiving” God. She also displays visually the consequences of this desire, since this whiteness destroys her text and makes invisible her ink, her blood.21

Cha also inserts photographs of Maria Falconetti and St. Therese as Joan of Arc, thus connecting St. Therese’s burning love of God with Joan of Arc’s being burned for her love of country. Cha juxtaposes these narratives of self-immolating love against a screenplay describing the givens of marriage (102): “She is married to her husband who is unfaithful to her. No reason is necessary except that he is a man. It is a given . . . . He is the husband, and she is the wife. He is the man. She is the wife. It is a given. He does as he is the man. She does as she is the woman, and the wife.”22 Through this juxtaposition, Cha exposes the apparatus of marriage that enables St. Therese’s and Joan of Arc’s feminine burnings. Further, Cha shows how desire for such pain is itself

20 16-7.
21 Cha makes the connection between blood and ink in the Urania/Astronomy section. She writes: “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 the boundary of this surface. More. Others. When possible ever possible to puncture to scratch to imprint Expel. Ne te cache pas. Revele toi. Sang. Encre. Of its body’s extention of its containment” (65). Cha’s emphasis.
22 102.
generated through the system of marriage (109): “Mother you who take the husband from your back to your breast you who unbar your breast to the husband his hunger your own the husband takes away your pain with his nourishment.”

The pain, then, produced through childbirth and nursing—the pain and need to expel, to void—is taken away by the husband’s hunger, by the husband sucking the mother’s white milk. By choosing St. Therese and Joan of Arc as model lovers, and by emphasizing the desire for destruction, Cha de-sexualizes love poetry as well. She highlights the desire for submission that underlies much erotic poetry and connects this desire for submission to feminine desires for self-destruction or purity.

A reading that privileges the muses as ciphers, however does not entirely clarify the text. Against this way of ordering, \textit{DICTEE} offers another way of deciphering. Each story can be read as responses to the questions, in the introductory pages, posed to a girl who enters a new school and discovers another student who has also come from afar (20). Her family asks her:

\begin{verbatim}
From A Far
What nationality
or what kindred and relation
what blood relation
what blood ties of blood
what ancestry
what race generation
what houses clan tribe stock strain
what lineage extraction
what breed sect gender denomination caste
what stray ejection misplaced
\end{verbatim}

\footnotetext{23}{109.}

\footnotetext{24}{20.}
Read this way, the autobiography of St. Therese becomes a response to “what ancestry,” thus lining Theresa Hak Kyung Cha to her namesake St. Therese. Through this ancestry, Cha exposes how naming and re-naming place one in a genealogy.

Yet another way of ordering the text is through the *t'ai chi* readings (see handout): unity; yin and yang; three powers: heaven, earth, and humans; four images or cardinals: North, South, East, West; six convergences: the four cardinals and the Zenith and Nadie; seven stars: the big dipper; eight diagrams (necessary to make readings); unending series of nines; tenth, a circle within a circle, a series of concentric circles.\(^{25}\) The list of nines, perhaps, is as endless as the *t'ai chi* implies. These unending series of nine then offer ways into the text, but also mark the limitations of “decipherment.”

Through this proliferation of ciphers, Cha critiques hermeneutic readings and links deciphering and naming to the Japanese colonial obsession with categories: “acting on the Japanese love of order and of defined rank, exact titles of honour were provided for the wives of officials. These were divided into nine grades: ‘Pure and Reverent Lady,’ ‘Pure Lady,’ ‘Chaste Lady,’ ‘Chaste Dame,’ ‘Worthy Dame,’ ‘Just Dame,’ ‘Peaceful Dame,’ and ‘Upright Dame.’\(^{26}\) This ordering is profoundly a colonizing maneuver (again, we could organize our reading of *DICTEE* around these nine titles). Cha further connects this desire for decipherment with the act of the priest: “He the one who deciphers he the one who invokes in the Name. He the one who becomes He. Man-God.”\(^{27}\) Cha denies the reader this ability to decipher and name her text. This unending

\(^{25}\) This translation is a combination of Cha’s (173) and my own.

\(^{26}\) 29.

\(^{27}\) 13.
series of nine refuses to allow the reader to rest in her readings. It denies her any calculus or theory upon which she can rely to make sense of this experience of reading. In this manner, *DICTEE* emphasizes the responsibility, the impossibility and the necessity of reading. Faced with a text that defies decipherment, the reader must still read even as it is impossible to comprehend fully. To return to Keenan’s re-defining of responsibility, it puts us in a situation where “we do not know exactly what we should do . . . [where] we have nowhere else to turn, not even back to our ‘self’” in order for us to face the responsibility of reading.

This proliferation of ciphers also represents Cha’s attempt to render comprehensible her own life as text, or her own text as life. Just as she re-works English to show its limitations, she re-works ciphers and places them in constant motion to show their inadequacy and necessity. She includes “real-life” events, St. Therese’s autobiography, fictional events and historical documents to complicate the relation between author and narrator. Although I have been referring to some experiences as Cha’s, there is no reason to pin them in this manner. Faced with the responsibility of narrating her mother’s and other “ancestors’” experiences, Cha brings together a text, mostly without proper citation, that reveals the necessity of authorship, but also denies any way of calculating it.

Cha also employs constant motion—no rest, no roots—in translation. It is impossible to read *DICTEE* without realizing the importance of translation. The title must be translated, the text must be translated, there are translation exercises within the text: indeed, there are translations all over the text. Although I don’t have time here to elaborate on this, just as Cha emphasizes the act of speaking in order to make the reader
aware of the apparatus that enables speech, Cha puts in motion every dictionary
definition of translation to make the reader aware of the act of reading or
comprehension. At the same time, Cha marks the limits of translation. She refuses to
translate the hangul (Korean) on the cave wall that is the first page of her book. She
refuses to translate the Chinese characters throughout, except for the t’ai chi. Rather than
translating these words, she offers them as stains from which readers—unless they read
Korean and Chinese characters—cannot set their meaning into motion. She also sets
into motion every dictionary definition of dictation and inhabitation.

What then would an Asian American theory in postcolonial studies, or Asian
American theory, look like? It would certainly draw from theory generated from other
fields. However, rather than allowing their easy translation, it would set these theories in
motion so that the experiences of Asian Americans could not be pinned or calculated. It
would admit that theory could never calculate or completely account for the experiences
of Asian Americans. It would offer historical events and material conditions as ciphers,
but refuse to let them fully account for experiences and/or texts. Offering no rest or no
elsewheres, it would connect the experiences of immigrants and citizens, postcolonials
and Americans. However, it would also expose how these experiences exceed this
connection by emphasizing how both language both relies on and disseminate experience.
In terms of texts about Asian Americans, it would read the “stains” of these texts for
memories and history. Asian American theory, then, would engage responsibility and
refuse conceptions of theory as alibis or culprits. Most importantly, it would refuse to
erase itself as theory.

28 All the definitions are taken from the online OED.