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THROWING YOUR VOICE:

AN INTERVIEW WITH CATHY PARK
HONG

*P*oetry is thought. More than offering an object for aesthetic contemplation, poetry speaks; poetry thinks. It does so, as CATHY PARK HONG once put it, in more than one tongue, operating in the spaces between “mangled languages.”¹ As she writes in “Zoo,” a poem from her 2002 collection *Translating Mo’um*,

La the word
Ma speaks
Ba without you²

CATHY PARK HONG is a poet dedicated to expanding and experimenting with the capacities of a living art. Her writing, editing, and performances across media seek to open up the “interactive possibilities” of poetry for the sake of providing “alternative ways of living within the existing real,” as she puts it. “What are ways in which the poetic praxis can be a ritual for social experimentation? The poem as a



Cathy Park Hong. Photo credit: Mores McWreath.

public encounter is entrenched in habit. How many ways can we change this encounter?”³

Hong’s work as a poet is thus deeply immersed in questions of method—attending not only to how poetry looks, sounds, and creates meanings, but also to how encounters with poetry are themselves necessarily sites of experimentation and challenge. As she writes in a 2014 essay, “The encounter with poetry needs to change constantly via the internet, via activism and performance, so that poetry can continue to be a site of agitation, where the audience is not a receptacle of conditioned responses but is unsettled and provoked into participatory response.”⁴ Such constant change is at once an activist demand with political significance, as well as an open invitation for the participatory imagination. “A honeycomb of lights. / The world pours in,” to cite a couplet from a poem in Hong’s second volume of poetry, *Dance Dance Revolution* (2007).⁵ Cathy Hong’s poetry is dedicated to multiplying such sites of openness and agitation. This includes undertaking creolized experiments in translation and language-creation that explore “what language can endure while still producing meaning” as well as creating dystopian storyworlds of imperial expansion and corporate global fantasy. Such a project extends, significantly, to Hong’s investment in forging new channels of aesthetic engagement and political solidarity.⁶

A professor of creative writing at Rutgers University and Poetry Editor at the *New Republic*, Hong is the author of three volumes of experimental poetry as well as numerous essays and collaborations that meditate on the soundscapes, and also the politics, of experimentalism. Throughout her poetry sequences, she develops an ever-changing technopoetics of contraction and expansion that functions—that agitates—in and between languages, in and between poetic forms, and in and between landscapes and cityscapes of power. Her debut volume, *Translating Mo’um* (Hanging Loose Press, 2002), received a Pushcart Prize; her second collection, *Dance Dance Revolution* (W. W. Norton, 2007), was selected by Adrienne Rich for the Barnard Women Poets Prize. A serial poem in alternating hybrid languages, *Dance Dance Revolution* is also a work of speculative fiction, which invents an all-too-recognizable future dystopia of planned cities and global tourism, along with a pair of character witnesses who chronicle these worlds in their distinctive poetic voices. Hong literally invents a new language for one speaker, the Desert Guide, whose “sizable Mouthpiece role” at once bears the linguistic residue of global migration and testifies to the

art of survival in the volume's storyworld. In her most recent volume of poetry, *Engine Empire* (2012), Hong presents a triptych of dystopian "boomtowns," the murderous Wild West of the American 1860s, the accelerated urban-industrial growth of contemporary China, and the sad and quietly terrifying cognitive saturation of our experience by "smart" technology in the imminent Silicon Valley future.

At once conceptual and analytical, at once narratively, formally, and semiotically experimental, Hong's poetry explores what it means to become an *instrument*, whether an instrument of music and art or an instrument of violence and empire. For all their linguistic experimentalism, her books are also dramas of artistic consequence and political consciousness alike.

In addition to her work as a poet, editor, and professor, Cathy Park Hong has increasingly confronted entrenched public habits toward art—and seeks to transfigure them—in her work as an essayist. In her landmark 2014 essay, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde" for the *Lana Turner* journal, Hong took aim at "the luxurious opinion that anyone can be 'post-identity' and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are."⁷ She was writing about the self-proclaimed canon of avant-garde poetry as upheld by the likes of Kenneth Goldsmith, Vanessa Place, and Marjorie Perloff—to name only the most public figures⁸—but her words just as readily reflect on the racist unconscious on display in whitewashed Hollywood films, art world "provocations," and the violent erasure of people of color in the U.S. police state.

Hong's polemic in that essay is twofold: in spite of its "delusions of whiteness," the avant-garde—like the art world, like the world—can never "escape the taint of subjectivity and history."⁹ In spite of persisting tendencies for poets and scholars to forge canons of experimental art that both exploit and erase the lived phenomenon of race, the avant-garde is never raceless. The answer, however, is hardly just to refurbish the canon so that the art world can once again congratulate itself on its more racially diverse roster of past experiments. The point is instead to create new futures, new sites of agitation. There is a new movement in poetry and art, she writes, with its own networks of distribution and common commitment to participatory social action. It is a "movement galvanized by the activism of Black Lives Matter, spearheaded by writers of color who are

at home in social media activism and print magazines.”¹⁰ It is to this movement that Hong’s work both contributes and, in recent essays and performances, seeks to conceptualize as well. “Fuck the avant-garde,” she writes. “We must hew our own path.”¹¹

On April 1, 2017, I spoke with Cathy Hong while driving to the Harrisburg, PA train station after her reading the previous evening at Penn State University. During that reading, she performed a number of her poems before reading and discussing an essay she had recently completed on the stand-up comedy of Richard Pryor. On our way to the train station, we had a further opportunity to discuss her recent writing, the restlessness of the artist, the refusal to stand for racial erasure, and the aesthetics of the stutter.

JPE/ In your recent essays, you confront problems of audience and medium that extend from the poetry world to the public, political sphere. In its attention to social groups, echo chambers, irony, the lack of irony, and the question of sincerity, your work as a poet and essayist alike is attuned to the ideology of medium: the spoken word, the sound of language, the look of language, the possibilities of poetic form, the nature of stories, the landscapes of power, and the politics of race. I read an interview where you were talking about, or perhaps joking about, creating a screenplay or film treatment of the “Ballad of Our Jim.”¹² I thus wish to ask you: what are some of the actual mediums you use

to address some of these questions? More than just formal experiments, your work seems to be invested in medium-based experiments in particular.

*CPH/ I started off wanting to be a visual artist, and I was inspired by the way artists are more mobile with their mediums. Conceptual art is a post-studio practice where the artist starts with the idea and then uses whatever medium fits that process. I see writing that way. I have these questions and, in order to answer or resolve these questions, I think: does this idea fit the lyric form or the novel? Because I am restless, the poetic form doesn’t always work for me. With *Dance Dance Revolution* and *Engine Empire*, I’ve always been fascinated with the materiality of language and different constraint-based exercises to make the artificial even more artificial as a way to point out its artifice. In other words, I spray the artificial shell a neon pink so people are aware of its artifice, whether the artificial shell is the lyric form or the artificial shell is the English*

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language, and then I undermine the medium to see if there is something else in there that we are trying to get at.

My subject matter has always been racially based, but before, my poetry addressed race indirectly, or through a more historical or speculative persona-based approach. Lately, I've been thinking: what is *my* racial consciousness? How can I track what I am feeling and thinking in the present, and what medium is most suitable for that? I did not want it to be mediated through various poetic experiments and fictionalized characters: I wanted to write about it in a very direct way. I couldn't do it through poetry, because I see the lyric medium as ultimately an elevated form, an artificial form. A lot of poets don't approach it this way, but I approach it this way: when writing in the lyric form, you're throwing your voice. It's a dramatic monologue, and I didn't want to do a dramatic monologue. I just wanted to talk. It was really hard for me. I had been so used to throwing my voice, I didn't know how to just talk. Poets approach poetry through song, or talk, or inscription. I couldn't talk through a poetic medium. It ended up being this nonfiction hybrid.

JPE/ *One thing that seems abundantly clear, given the types of essays you have been writing recently and what they are about, is that talk is never direct, either—so that the person who is very good at talking “directly” is really a well-oiled machine. That is an interesting confrontation, how even talk is mediated so as to function as direct talk. This bears significantly on the nature of political expression and involvement.*

CPH/ Yes, how you even structure a sentence is a well-oiled machine, and I realize that. But I think I am sort of hanging up the notion, for now. I am still interested in tackling the materiality of language, but right now, I am trying to ignore all of that for now: even though I am taking it through this rhetorical address that is really artificial, to just trying to get a message across.

JPE/ *You've recently been writing about Richard Pryor, which seems to be an occasion to reflect on this very topic. That is, much of what comes to the fore in your discussion of Pryor's stand-up comedy is the how bald the anger and violence of his language was, and yet the way he performed his monologues made everyone laugh. As you explain, your first step*

was to sit down and transcribe his words. This had the effect of showing how pure his language was, in its anger. But it did not match up with what actually happened on stage, which had to do with his face, his overall performance: that is, the totality of his becoming a material signifier onstage. There are two forms of talk, which are really different. You seem to be interested in both—as well as the difference between them: the written materiality of the word in its directness, as well as all these other kinds of supplements that make up the act of speaking publicly.

CPH/ Through his performance and his delivery, he was so direct. He was just telling it like it is. But when I was transcribing Pryor, and reading his script, it was like taking an orchestra and isolating the string section. If you just see the words on the page, you are getting one part of Pryor, but there is still that distilled anger on the page. His whole performance makes it human—it's not just talk; he turns comedy into song and cinema and tragedy. In his performances (which I don't talk about this in the essay), when he talks about the differences of fucking a white woman versus fucking a black woman, which I think is the most taboo of all his subjects. I thought, "he cannot get away with that," but I was still laughing when I was watching him.

I was always writing around my anger, and I don't know why but I just cannot directly confront it through the poetic form. I can't get around the mechanisms of the poetic line. Maybe it's because I've studied poetry for too

long, whereas I haven't with prose. I was interested in that directness. When I saw Pryor, that was when I was changing directions from the poetry I had written.

JPE/ *The difference between having anger and, say, using or deploying anger seems particularly significant here. When this anger has been gathering for a long time—and is shared collectively—the idea of what it means to conceptualize it as historical, as directed, as political, takes on particular urgency.¹³ To think about how that anger demands shedding one's formal habits or reevaluating what happens artistically is, I think, a really important process and discourse. Can you say more about this?*

CPH/ But it's also not just anger. One could say I have a very maximalist style, but my poems are also about the unspoken, like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's or Paul Célán's work. There is a tradition of poetry that's about the limitations of language and how there is something else there that is trying to express itself beyond what is on the page. The way the poem expresses the incommunicable is through the music. I am writing an essay on Theresa Cha's *Dictee*. Theresa Cha highlights the limitations of the English language, how she cannot really capture her conflicted diasporic conscious through her immigrant stuttering. I have always been attracted to the aesthetics of the stutter, whereby inscribing a word down, this is only a fragment of this racialized conscious that cannot be spelled out—because there is no vocabulary for it

because it's always obfuscated by Western forms and systems of meaning. After watching Pryor, I felt limited by always speaking to the limitations of language.

I want to try to spell out this racial consciousness through prose. I wanted to try to map it out, spell it out for other people, explain it to myself by being as clear as I can about all its contradictions and murky nuances. Basically do everything that I refused to do through poetry—explain myself, make my problems clear to the reader (it's almost like I don't trust the reader). I always teach Lyn Hejinian's *The Rejection of Closure* and how there is sort of this interactive relationship between the reader and the writer where reading is like a *Choose Your Own Adventure*. The reader comes to their own conclusion. But I've also become sick of how people ask the wrong questions about race literature. They read it the wrong way, claim to not understand it. And for now, I'm hanging up my poetry hat, and forsaking all of this “show don't tell” business, and saying, hold up—I'm not going to show you, I am going to tell you what's up.

JPE/ *I realize, by the way, that I have been trying to lead you toward extrapolating the*

aesthetics of the stutter into a shift in medium, as if your interest in moving away from poetry were part of that stutter. But this would mean thinking of such a shift as a poetic demand in its own right, consistent with poetry itself, rather than facing up to the insufficiencies of artistic language to do the kind of work you describe. And yet I think it is really wonderful and brilliant to be blowing that off in some ways and saying no, and not trusting the audience and not trusting openness. Umberto Eco did something similar when he rebutted his own notion of the “Open Work,” and this is also a key part of Pryor's work, too. He actually says the thing.

CPH/ He says what everyone is thinking and afraid to say. I've seen that a lot of times before—of course Baldwin does it as well as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich. He just spells out what people are thinking, and if they were to say it, it would come out as a stutter. He says it in the baldest and bluntest way possible. That takes balls.

JPE/ *Could you speak about this baldness in terms of teaching and mentoring, too? I think that Lorde is especially great in this regard, because in saying the thing that hasn't been*

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spoken, but which people are thinking or not thinking about—specifically anger, anger about the marginalization of black women even within feminism—she thereby allows for the possibility of real solidarity. As for the liberal, democratic ideal of everyone coming up with their own interpretations: well, they don't, or, if they do, they're fractious, incommensurate, and often frightening. That fractiousness, those differences and so forth, are not themselves democracy or solidarity.

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If we're talking about Asian Americans, then we're not at that point yet where we can move beyond voice. We are still invisible.

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CPH/ Yeah, they aren't. I've been thinking this before. I want to talk about this essay I've been working on that is sort of tangentially related, thinking of fractiousness, brokenness. I am working on this essay about Theresa Cha. Much of the scholarship around has to do with the aesthetics of silence and the stutter, as well as Korean colonial history and the war, orchestrated by U.S. Cold War tactics, that Americans don't know about. I was reading various secondary sources on her: essays and monographs on her. I just find it fascinating that no one talks about her murder or that

she was raped. And no one investigated what happened. Instead they skirt around this fact. At first, I thought, “oh, it's because her death was so brutal, and these scholars don't want to sensationalize her death and instead really want to foreground her work. Otherwise, she is going to be mythologized as this martyr figure.” It was a protective gesture as to why they did this.

But then I found it disturbing that there was absolutely nothing about her death, and it was just a bunch of poststructural critique of her writing: one after another. I couldn't help but feel, in a weird way, that all this academic writing about her was silencing her. Many of these scholars, influenced by poststructural thought, wrote that Theresa Cha's *Dictee* was a reaction against the 1960s and the 70's multiculturalism where Asian American activists demanded that we needed to speak up and find our voice, that kind of Audre Lorde outspokenness. Some of these scholars argued that Theresa Cha's work is moving beyond that, and it's about deconstructing voice and how having a voice is not enough. But then by outlining or highlighting how she's doing that, they sort of end up sublimating her as a person, as a struggling artist, and addressing her only as this abstract subaltern subject. If we're talking about Asian Americans, then we're not at that point yet where we can move beyond voice. We are still invisible. If we use Theresa Cha as an example, she was raped and murdered by a security guard, and no one wrote about it at the time. If you compare her to the Central Park jogger, there was a ton of

media surrounding it with her, but, for Cha, there was not even a newspaper article. There have been no articles about her death since. I find that interesting. That is a complete departure from what you were talking about.

JPE/ Not in the least. This is something you talk about in the “Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde” essay: that the subjectivity of the body, that race cannot be erased, must not be erased, no matter how hard people might try. And yet the example of Theresa Cha is indeed harrowing: in the U.S., Dictee has become part of the literary canon (at least at the university level), and yet the prominence of that work seems to have been utterly divorced from Cha’s career as an experimental artist and filmmaker, not to mention disembodied from the violence of her death. How do you address this—and how do you think this disavowal, this erasure, can best be redressed?

CPH/ It’s interesting when you compare Cha to Sylvia Plath where there’s been a cottage industry of biographies surrounding her. Because Cha is nested within the Avant-Garde, and the kind of postmodern racial discourse that was popular in the 1990s and early 2000s, critics have made a concerted effort to separate biography from text, as if writing about her biography would taint everything she was doing, especially since *Dictee* itself is a subversion of biographical conventions. As far as her work as an experimental artist and filmmaker, much of it has to do with access. It’s only been recently that the University of California Press put out a collected works of Cha’s, *Exilée/*

Temp Morts, that’s everything BUT *Dictee*. *Exilée/Temp Morts* is an important addition to Cha’s scholarship and I really hope more critics concentrate on that.

JPE/ Restoring the connection between biography and experimentalism, and between the body and experimentalism, is something you’ve been thinking about a lot. This relates directly to your discussion of Richard Pryor. As you argue in your essay on his stand-up work, Pryor’s ability to tell the truth so baldly is predicated on the way he uses his face, his bodily performance, and the way he becomes his part. In a way, your attention to the critical treatment or non-treatment of Theresa Cha is a more mortally specific version of this truth. We have to think about the person. Whereas there is a way in which the aesthetics of the stutter, however much poststructuralism might present it as politically recuperable—opening up gaps in language, gaps in meaning—still risks this kind of erasure.

I’m really struck by how strong a shift this all represents in your work, in terms of the ways in which you confront these questions. I don’t plan to ask you if this is a permanent one or if it’s site specific, and it’s not my place to ask. The fact that you’ve changed mediums to think about this is really something.

CPH/ I don’t think it is permanent. We’ll see; this is just where I am right now. It’s like I am taking a break and then I am going to go back to writing poetry (although, I have a lot of doubts about poetry right now). I guess it’s

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... there is so little writing that communicates to people like her in the way that I felt before I discovered Baldwin, Cha, C lan, and all those writers. Right now, that’s all I want to do.

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a strong shift, and part of it—I said this last night—is being a mother and rethinking what I should do as a writer. It might change again.

JPE/ And perhaps also thinking about what it means to mentor, to teach, to model. That’s not insignificant.

CPH/ No, it’s not insignificant. I mean, there is a lot more I can say about that. I don’t want to say my concerns have become more practical, just more pressing to what’s happening now. I was doing a reading in western Michigan and it was right after Trump’s election. There was this one young Korean American woman who was a college student, and she came up to me and asked, “Can I hug you?” And I said sure. She started crying, and saying, “I feel really isolated out here. I feel really alone.” I think right now I just have a much more direct approach to writing, where I want to speak to people like her. I think there is so little writing that communicates to people like her in the way that I felt before I discovered Baldwin, Cha, C lan, and all those writers. Right now, that’s all I want to do. You have to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I’d like to afflict the comfortable but also try to comfort the afflicted.

*JPE/ Not to analyze crudely, but I think those are the kinds of books and works, like Ta-Nehisi Coates’s **Between the World and Me**, like Rebecca Solnit’s **Hope in the Dark**, that you see people carrying around for precisely the reason you suggest—in the way that people still carry around Audre Lorde’s **Sister Outsider**. There’s a way in which these books, even in their scale, offer something for people to keep close to their hearts as comfort, but also as a provocation, a kind of armature or weapon, even.*

CPH/ Definitely. I don’t know if I want to write a Rebecca Solnit or a Ta-Nehisi Coates, even though I love Ta-Nehisi Coates’s book. I guess it’s just more interest in communicating while questioning. Before I was always questioning the medium of communication, and I am still doing that. But I also kind of want to communicate in as clear a way as possible why the narrative modes or mediums we’ve been using so far, that follow the mythos of the American individual, atomize radical racial thought rather than galvanize it into a movement.

JPE/ Can you say a few words about how you’ve been pursuing this kind of directness of late?

CPH/ I'm continuing to work on this collection of essays. Its seeds are the "Delusions of Whiteness" essay, but it's more expansive where I integrate autobiography, politics, and literary criticism to explore how racial experience has been standardized in poetry and fiction. It's been hard to write about without making it front and center, but I also explore this current administration, and how writers of color can re-evaluate American literature and develop an oppositional poetics and aesthetic frame-of-thought as a reaction. I see the book as a sort of portrait of an artist but also as a *cri de coeur*. The subjects are a random assortment—right now, for instance, I'm writing about the history of swimming pools as a way to explore questions of diversity—but hopefully it will all come together!

/ Notes /

¹ See Robyn Creswell, "Cathy Park Hong on *Engine Empire*," *The Paris Review*, August 23, 2011, <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2011/08/23/cathy-park-hong-on-engine-empire/>.

² Cathy Park Hong, "Zoo," *Translating Mo'um* (Brooklyn, NY: Hanging Loose Press, 2002), 13.

³ Cathy Park Hong, "A Proposition by Cathy Park Hong: Stand Up @ The New Museum," May 15, 2013, 1:54:01, *YouTube*, <https://youtu.be/KVf0CGEi2nU>.

⁴ Cathy Park Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," *Lana Turner: A Journal of Poetry and Opinion* 7 (2014), <http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/7/delusions-of-whiteness-in-the-avant-garde>

⁵ Cathy Park Hong, "Almanac," *Dance Dance Revolution* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 72.

⁶ A. K. Afferez, "Fluency, Fractures, and Fabrication in Cathy Park Hong," *The Critical Flame: A Journal of Literature & Culture*, January 19, 2015, <http://criticalflame.org/fluency-fractures-and-fabrication-in-cathy-park-hong/>. See also Joshua Kryah, "An Interview with Poet Cathy Park Hong," *Poets & Writers*, July 11, 2007, https://www.pw.org/content/interview_poet_cathy_park_hong.

⁷ Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness."

⁸ See also Hong, "There's a New Movement in American Poetry and It's Not Kenneth Goldsmith," *New Republic* (October 1, 2015), <https://newrepublic.com/article/122985/new-movement-american-poetry-not-kenneth-goldsmith>. For an early overview of this discourse, see the special forum in the *Boston Review* on "Race and the Poetic Avant-Garde" (March 10, 2015), <http://bostonreview.net/blog/boston-review-race-and-poetic-avant-garde>. See also Dorothy J. Wang, *Thinking Its Presence: Form, Race, and Subjectivity in Contemporary Asian American Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013); and Timothy Yu, *Race and the Avant-Garde: Experimental and Asian American Poetry Since 1965* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁹ Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness."

¹⁰ Hong, "There's a New Movement."

¹¹ Hong, "Delusions of Whiteness."

¹² Robyn Creswell, "Cathy Park Hong on *Engine Empire*." See also Cathy Park Hong with Andy Fitch, *The Conversant*, June 26, 2013, <http://theconversant.org/?p=3171>.

¹³ See Sue J. Kim, *On Anger: Race, Cognition, Narrative* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2013), esp. 1-69. See also the *ASAP/Journal* editors' forum on "Angry Women at 25," *ASAP/Journal* 1, no. 2 (May 2016): 199-235.

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CATHY PARK HONG's latest poetry collection, *Engine Empire*, was published in 2012 by W.W. Norton. Her other collections include *Dance Dance Revolution*, chosen by Adrienne Rich for the Barnard Women Poets Prize, and *Translating Mo'um*. Hong is the recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship and the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship. She is the poetry editor of *The New Republic* and is Full Professor at Rutgers University.