KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

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Profiles
2003 was a memorable year from many different aspects for those of us engaged in Korean studies at The George Washington University. First of all, it was the centennial of Korean immigration to the United States. Secondly, it was the 20th anniversary of the Korean Language and Culture Program at GW. Finally, it marked the 10th anniversary of the passing of Hahn Moo-Sook, the namesake of this colloquium series.

Since the first group of 102 Koreans arrived in Honolulu on Jan. 13, 1903, aboard the S.S. Gaelic, Koreans, known for their resilience, have not only survived myriad hardships but they, their descendants, and their compatriots who arrived later have also been making their presence known in America, in Korea, and in Europe by their artistic and scholarly accomplishments. The theme we chose for the year’s colloquium was literature, as Hahn Moo-Sook was a writer. We decided to discuss “One Hundred Years of Korean American Literature” to commemorate the achievements of people of Korean ancestry in the United States.

After a long gestation, Korean American works are appearing, as if they cannot be contained anymore, winning awards and recognition through headlines. The increasing pool of Korean Americans represents a very diverse population. Distinguishing themselves from their predecessors, who were simply transposed Koreans living in America, more and more Korean American writers belong to the so-called “1.5 generation,” including those who immigrated to the US when they were very young or were born in the States, many of whom are in fact products of international and interracial marriages. Many Korean Americans, particularly those belonging to this generation, are eager to define their own place. For some, this means defining themselves as independent of ethnicity. Yet, it is their sensibility and vision of life, drawn from their particular experiences, that moves the readers. As the late Hahn Moo-Sook used to say, “[t]he way to be most universal is to be most specific.” The papers by the writers in this volume help us appreciate the beauty and creativity inspired by each Korean American author’s specificity.

Korean American writers’ works are no longer limited to biographical accounts. Many are deeply thought-provoking products dealing with all kinds of human conditions, not limited to Koreans or Americans. One thing that is common in all types of Korean American literature, however, is that, through their stories and songs, we learn about both Korea and the United States, even when authors try not to be concerned with the question of identity and ethnicity. This is why Korean American literature should not fall through the cracks but must be included as an authentic part of both Korean and American literature.

Korean American literature brings into focus some of the key issues of our time in the highly multicultural context in which we live. Korean Americans are a central part of modern processes involving diaspora, new hybridized ethnicities, language change, inter-generational conflict, and the global flow of ideas, media, and money. Korean Americans represent these changes in brilliant literature that captures in all its complexity the historical, societal, and political situations of Koreans and Korean Americans, as well as immigrants in general. The conveners of the HMS Colloquium felt that the time was ripe to present a program on Korean American literature. Two organizations, the Smithsonian Institution’s Asian Pacific American Program (APAP) and the National Museum of American History,
Behring Center, both of which had entertained ideas similar to that of the HMS Colloquium, agreed that the project deserved collaboration to more effectively mark this special year. The result was a two-part program.

On Friday, October 24, on the eve of the HMS Colloquium, the Smithsonian Institution's Korean American Centennial Celebration took place at the Carmichael Auditorium of the National Museum of American History. The event featured readings by Elaine Kim, foremost Korean American and Asian American literary scholar, and three Korean American writers that Elaine Kim calls "eminent icons of the present": Heinz Insu Fenkl, Nora Okja Keller, and Don Lee.

On Saturday, October 25, the 10th Hahn Moo-Sook Colloquium in the Korean Humanities was held at The George Washington University, with the same authors presenting their views on Korean American Literature, approaching it from two slightly different angles. While Elaine Kim and Heinz Insu Fenkl gave a historical overview and their assessment on what the future might bring, Nora Okja Keller and Don Lee projected their moving personal experiences as writers and, in the case of Don Lee, as a publisher as well. Patricia P. Chu and You-me Park, both Asian American literature scholars, provided commentary.

We were thrilled to have the four distinguished speakers, as were the audience who attended both events. We were grateful to the two commentators, who helped us further understand the soul and cry of the heart expressed by our other speakers. Our thanks go to the members of the Smithsonian Institution's Asian Pacific American Program, especially its director, Franklin Odo, who kindly proposed the idea of co-sponsoring the two-day meeting. Terry Hong, the APAP's Media Arts Consultant, impressed us with her organizational and interpersonal skills, and facilitated our work immensely during the long months of planning for the colloquium. William J. Frawley, Dean of the Columbian College of Arts and Sciences at GW, was very supportive of the program and made opening remarks emphasizing the importance of the study of humanities. We were encouraged, as usual, by the moral and spiritual support offered by the Elliott School of International Affairs, especially by Mike Mochizuki, director of the Sigur Center for Asian Studies, and Dean Harry Harding of the Elliott School of International Affairs. We also thank Korean Ambassador Han Sung-joo and his wife, art historian Yi Song-mi, who graciously hosted a dinner for the speakers and organizers of the colloquium at their lovely residence. We have also received help from various volunteer students, especially Austin Kim and Catarina Kim. We owe a great deal to Debbie Toy, formerly with the Sigur Center, and to Ikuko Turner, one of the main pillars of the Center, who have offered their professional and personal help at every step of our planning and publication. At the final stage of the publication process, Luke Johnson of the Sigur Center provided his meticulous care and attention in putting the manuscript into a publishable form. To these and many other people who have helped to make this colloquium such a memorable experience, we want to say “Thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

The Editors

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Washington, D.C.
I haven’t had a chance yet to read Susan Choi’s new novel, *American Woman*. But I am very interested in what I have heard her say about her fascination with the 1970s, when it seems to her people truly believed they could change the world. “How could it be that people were like that?” she has asked. The characters in her new book are based on Wendy Yoshimura and Patty Hearst of the Symbionese Liberation Army days. Choi, who was only four years old at the time of the Hearst kidnapping, notes that the most radical activists of her college days were the Young Republicans. To her and to all of us, the present could not be more different from the not so distant past.

Not long ago, I read an obituary about a white woman who had given her four-year-old daughter to a middle class black couple in the late 1950s because she just could not manage as the single mother of a biracial child even in cosmopolitan New York City, where she lived. She said that people cast aspersions on her on the street and tried to get her evicted from her apartment. Meanwhile, her daughter grew up to become a broadcast journalist who, in the mid-1990s, made a television documentary that featured her and her mother. The mother’s main comment was not so much regret for what she felt she had to do, but rather astonishment at how much issues of race had changed in American society since the 1950s. Today, middle class American women are not so harshly criticized for single motherhood, and giving up a child only because her father is black is harder to understand.

Growing up in Silver Spring, Maryland, in the 1950s, my brother and I were targets of the kinds of hate crimes that schoolmates are capable of. The very same little boys who threw stones and mud at my brother and yelled “chingchongchim-an” or “slanted pussy” at me as I walked by have grown up to become old men who surf the Internet for “Oriental” women whom they fantasize will provide some respite in the confusing new world of gender bending and equal rights agendas.

Likewise, though the shift from 1950s segregation to the age of Denzel Washington and Condoleezza Rice has been dramatic thanks to the African American-led Civil Rights movement, the superficiality and class limits of these changes becomes apparent from time to time. According to Human Rights Watch, African Americans are seventeen times more likely to be jailed than whites in the US, so that almost two-thirds of the prison population is comprised of people who make up only a quarter of Americans. Clifford Rechtschaffen of Golden Gate University School of Law writes that “Race—more than income or poverty or other factors—still determines how close a family lives to toxic waste sites, how likely it is that their children will get lead poisoning, or how much an individual will pay for a car loan.” And despite the economic progress of African Americans over the past four decades, they as a
group still have much less access to capital, housing, good schools, and health care than white Americans. Instead, African Americans have the highest infant mortality rate and are number one in cancer deaths and still face predatory insurance, mortgage, and banking practices, as well as redlining by trust companies, banks, and pension funds.

Three years ago, I was giving one of a series of lectures for the American Studies Association in Japan when a Japanese member in the audience asked me if I felt guilty about what the South Koreans did in Vietnam. When I replied that I did not, she said, “I resent being expected to feel guilty for what people of my grandfather’s generation might have done during World War II.” I replied that many white Americans disavow responsibility for racial injustice towards African Americans, insisting that they had never owned any slaves and their ancestors hadn’t either. However, a number of white American colleagues about my age are now inheriting lots of money from parents who were able to benefit from the inflation of real estate values between the 1940s and 1950s and today, but none of my black friends have had this kind of fortune. Why? Because African Americans were systematically prevented by de jure and de facto legal and extra-legal discrimination from accumulating property assets that could be transferred from generation to generation. I told the Japanese woman that while she should not feel guilty for what people of her grandfather’s generation did during World War II, she should pay attention to the possible legacy of effects that might linger in the 1990s. Also, I told her that although I did not feel guilty about what Korean soldiers did in Vietnam, I made it my business to know exactly what they did. We should not ignore history.

Just as I am able to see differences in opportunity structure among my white and black friends, Asian Americans are blessed with the ability to see—if we look—two Americas at the same time. We are not black, but neither are we the presumed mainstream audience. So I don’t think we can quite say, as young folks often do, “that’s history” or, as old folks often do, “get over it and move on.”

Nothing, Walter Benjamin has written, is lost to history. I agree with Avery Gordon’s contention that there are ghosts among us, a “seething presence” that haunts the present. The past isn’t dead. It may be a key to understanding the present.

I have been asked to provide an overview of Korean American literature this morning. I notice that it’s Heinz’s responsibility to talk about the future. He, Nora, and Don are eminent icons of the present. So I think I should suggest a topography of Korean American writing that begins in the past, hopefully as it helps us think about the present and future.

The earliest Korean American writing emerged from the context of a century and a half of persistent and deeply-rooted racist inscriptions of Asians in both official and mass cultures as grotesquely alien “others.” Pressed to demonstrate the falseness of these representations, early Korean and other Asian American writers often attempted to present the “true story,” sometimes by showing how Asian Americans could become successfully “Westernized” or “Americanized.” For writers who had to fight to even establish themselves as discursive subjects, dealing with subtleties, hybridities, paradoxes, and layers must have seemed impossibly luxurious.

Historically, Korean Americans, like other Asian Americans, were materially and discursively excluded from the mainstream of American life, denied subjectivity and defined instead according to the degree of threat they were thought to pose to the dominant culture at particular points in time. While Korean American writing emerges from conditions shared by other Asian American groups, it is also rooted in the particularities of Korean American social history. The size of the Korean American population was
until recently only a fraction of the severely restricted Chinese and Japanese populations. Thus, unlike these other Asian American groups, Korean American communities have been dominated by successive groups of immigrants, which helps explain the relatively small number of published Korean American writings in English until quite recently. The double impact of US race discrimination and Japan's colonization of Korea effectively limited the growth of Korean American communities for six decades. Political and economic development of Korean American communities was also impeded by the “double colonization” of Korean immigrants, who could not look to their homeland as a source of merchandise for trade or for diplomatic assistance as other immigrants in the US traditionally did with varying degrees of success. Long after the Japanese occupation was formally ended in 1945, Korean American writing continued to express the particular anguish of the exile deprived even of the sustaining illusion of triumphant return “home” after a life of toil in a country where s/he felt hated. Korean American writers from New Il-han, Younghill Kang, and Richard Kim to Kim Ronyoung, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, and Sook Nyul Choi grapple in different ways with the effects of Japanese colonization on Koreans and Korean Americans. Only now, half a century after World War II, has this concern started to become muted in Korean American writing, which can be expected to address an ever increasing array of other themes.

I

The early Korean American literary voice is largely autobiographical and speaks primarily from the perspectives of educated exiles. The best known of these early writers is Younghill Kang (1903-1972), a pioneer of Korean American writing. The protagonist in both of Kang’s novels, Chung-pa Han, comes to America during the early years of the Japanese occupation of Korea. He concludes that the “ancient...spiritual planet that had been [his] father’s home,” old Korea, with its “curved lines, its brilliant colors, its haunting music, its own magic of being” was becoming a wasteland unable to sustain its young. “In loathing of death,” Han is pulled as if by “natural gravity” toward the younger, more vital cultures of the West.

As a pioneer Korean writer in English, Kang came to represent Korea and Koreans to Western readers, for whom he was both purveyor of the unfamiliar, in terms of a faraway Oriental nation, and reinforcer of the familiar, in terms of popular notions about backward peoples yearning for the light of the West. *The Grass Roof* (1931) describes the narrator’s life in Korea before his emigration to the West. *East Goes West* (1937) brings to light the lives of Korean exiled intellectuals in the urban US during the 1920s and 1930s. Kang himself considered the second book more important, but *The Grass Roof* attracted more critical attention. Reviewers may have preferred the more exotic earlier book, which is set entirely in Korea, because *East Goes West* presents an unflattering view of the underside of American life from the perspectives of people locked out by the color bar. Even so, despite its stories of rejection, brutality, loneliness, and hunger, many reviewers of *East Goes West* read the book as an Asian American “success story,” perhaps because the stories are often presented humorously and because the protagonist, Chung-pa Han, never relinquishes his hope of one day finding acceptance in American life. This reading misses, in my view, the deftness with which Kang satirizes both the misguided optimism and naiveté of his characters and the arrogance and ignorance of the Americans who reject them.

*East Goes West* brushes US history against the grain to reveal moments in the lives of those otherwise invisible to US American readers. Their work, their aspirations, and their absolute exclusion from American social and intellectual life,
are the subjects. Instead of taking the reader on a teleological immigrant’s journey from penniless foreigner to successful citizen, Kang’s book calls into question US American nationalist narratives of progress, equality, assimilation, and upward mobility with his portrait of Korean immigrants’ endless wandering. The three major characters fail to achieve their American dream, and the narrator finds no entry into American life; reading Shakespeare in unheated rooms, he can think only of food, and the young American woman he so eagerly hopes to befriend moves away, leaving no forwarding address. Hoping to impress his new employers with his Western learning, he scrambles to pick up scattered volumes of secondhand English classics as he struggles with his suitcases. The Americans, however, are only interested in him as a docile servant. Far from being impressed by his erudition, they simply fear that the books might be contaminated with “Oriental” germs. East Goes West ends with Han’s dream of being locked in a dark cellar with some blacks as torch-bearing white men are about to set them all on fire. His only hope is a Buddhist interpretation of the dream, that he will be reincarnated to a better life.

Two generations after Younghill Kang, another young Korean intellectual who immigrated to the US earned a name for himself as a writer of novels in English. Richard E[jun Kook] Kim was born in Kang’s native place, Hamheung, in northern Korea in 1932. Kim’s sensibilities were no doubt shaped by the four years he spent, between the ages of 18 and 22, immersed in the extraordinary circumstances of the Korean War, which left its indelible mark on millions of Koreans.

Partly for relief from those circumstances, Kim accepted an opportunity to go to the US and study at Middlebury College in 1954, fully intending to return to Korea to live and work, perhaps even in the military, which he believed would have a critical role in Korea’s political and economic future. It was at Middlebury, studying history and political philosophy, that he began to wonder, “Where do I come in?” A few years later, as a student in the University of Iowa writing program, he wrote his first novel, The Martyred (1964).

Set in the North Korean capital of Pyongyang during the Korean conflict, The Martyred explores the human conscience and the meanings of evil, suffering, and truth. The narrator, Captain Lee, has been sent by Colonel Chang of the South Korean Army Intelligence to investigate the deaths of twelve Christian ministers reportedly killed by the Communists. It turns out that all of the ministers died “like dogs,” pleading for mercy except for Reverend Shin, who was spared because he was the only one who did not grovel and recant his faith. Instead of telling the truth, however, Shin confesses that he betrayed the others to save his own life. The believers forgive him and flock to hear his sermons. Although he does not believe in God or in justice, Shin passionately preaches illusion because of his love for others whose weakness renders them unable to bear the truth—that there might be nothing beyond “death, inexorable death.”

Few first novels have met with the critical success of The Martyred, which remained on the nation’s best seller lists for twenty consecutive weeks and was translated into ten languages. The book remains the only work by an Asian American ever nominated for a Nobel Prize in literature. Stories about the young immigrant from Korea appeared in Newsweek and Life magazine. Literally overnight, Richard Kim became one of the best-known Koreans in the West, which in turn assured his fame in South Korea as well. Pearl S. Buck, whom Younghill Kang suggested had eclipsed him three decades earlier, wrote a promotional statement for Richard Kim.

Reading the reviews of Richard Kim’s work suggests just how much reception depends on the political moment, then as now. While the issues dealt with in The Martyred brought Kim critical
and popular success in 1964, in the age of existentialism and unembellished prose, Kim’s second novel, *The Innocent* (1968), was panned. *The Innocent* focuses on the events surrounding a military coup d'état in South Korea. The characters are all male army officers who learn the dangers of soft-hearted emotionalism and discover that at times one is forced to do evil deeds in order to be truly moral. The book was published at the height of popular resistance to the US involvement in the Vietnam War. Few critics found convincing the portrayal of South Korean military men as decent, moral leaders struggling to save their country from corruption and communism. The book’s primary defenders were rightists, who asserted that the book was “garroted, clubbed, shot in the back of the head, drawn, quartered and pushed over a high cliff” by the liberal book review establishment because of its negative depiction of soft-headed liberalism and because it presents “a disturbing essay on the Asian mind and spirit” at the very moment when US intellectuals were groping to make sense of the actions of the South Vietnamese military.

Kim contends that *The Innocent* was written not for Americans but for South Korean readers. “I wanted to show that you have to be prepared to die for your cause. You may have to kill people, but in the end you will have to pay; when you destroy others, you have to be prepared to be destroyed yourself,” he has said:

In a poor and backward country like Korea was at the time, the military may be the only instrument or institution of modernization. I had a lot of affection for the military. Almost everyone in the country was in it. Country boys learned how to drive cars and operate machinery in the military. The military had a certain role to play, and I wanted to be part of that. There was no other organization that could have matched the military in terms of organizational skills, discipline, and expertise.

Despite the author’s insistence that *The Innocent* was not about the 1962 military coup but rather about universal human problems and ethical and moral issues, such as the kinds of corruption that ultimately occurred in the South Korean military, many South Korean readers saw the book and its author as siding with the military, which was becoming more and more notorious for its excesses, abuses, and brutal repression of citizens from the 1960s almost through the 1980s. Certainly the South Korean officials enjoyed representing Kim as a friend of the military government.

Kim’s third book, *Lost Names: Scenes from a Korean Boyhood*, was published in 1970. The title refers to the Japanese practice of requiring Koreans to cast off their Korean names and adopt Japanese ones. The book is an autobiographical narrative about Kim’s boyhood years in Korea during the Japanese occupation with emphasis on the anti-Japanese activities of son and father. When *Lost Names* was translated into Korean, it was given the title *Bbaekun Irum* (forcibly seized or confiscated names) instead of the name Kim preferred, *Iloborin Irum* (lost names). He has said:

Koreans have lost so much. Things have been taken away, but we have also lost things ourselves. In Korea, we are always exhorted to rail against the bad guys who take things away. But did we do something dumb ourselves that feeds into our loss? In *Lost Names*, there are Japanese atrocities; but there are also Korean collaborators. My grandfather used to say that he shed no tears over the demise of the Korean royalty because they were rotten through and through; he just felt sorry that it had to be Japanese and not Koreans who got rid of them.

Perhaps discouraged by what seemed to be US readers’ lack of interest in Korea and Koreans, and by Korean readers’ desire for a “good guy vs. bad guy” thematic, Kim turned later in life to translation, South Korean television documentary work, and published a book of photo-
graphs. Rather than writing fiction about Korean Americans, from whom he says he feels estranged because he has never participated actively in Korean American community affairs, or about contemporary Korea, which he believes is the task of the young writers “in it right now,” Kim wants to focus on another place, another time, “I never intended to be a writer; I wanted to be a student of history. I am obsessed with the past, with all the things we have lost. I want to remember them, to record them, to think about them.”

II

During the past half century, a succession of first generation Korean intellectuals immigrated to the United States, beginning with a small number of political exiles who arrived shortly after Japan’s annexation of Korea, continuing with several thousand foreign students who arrived after additional US legislation excluding laboring immigrants from Asia passed in 1924, and increasing greatly when US immigration policies strongly favored educated Asian immigrant professionals and technicians in the early to mid-1970s. Korean immigrant intellectuals have produced relatively few literary works in English. Korean American writings in Korean can be found in many volumes of self-published poetry, as well as in occasional and periodical journals. According to poet Ch’oe Yun-hong, Korean American literature could extend the reach of Korean literature were it not for Koreans’ lack of sympathy for, or interest in, Korean Americans. Some scholars of Korean literature think that iniminmunhak (Korean immigrant literature) should be written in English about life in the US. Thus, it could be thought of as Korean, American, and “world” literature. They believe that Korean immigrant literature should be written by writers who live in the “dirt” of the US and can thus actually feel and not just imagine being “dirtied” by US life. “It would not be iniminmunhak if it just depicts a love affair with America,” they contend. Ch’oe asserts that the immigrants can’t be “literary” because their lives are too stressful and filled with suffering, adding that if they could really write about their immigrant lives, they would win the Pulitzer Prize.

One relatively recent Korean immigrant writer in English is Ty (T’ae Young) Pak. His first book, Guilt Payment, a collection of his short stories, was published in Hawai’i in 1983. Born in Korea in 1938, Pak came to the US as a foreign student in 1965. The most compelling stories in Guilt Payment highlight the incongruity between an immigrant’s Korean American life and his Korean past. In the title story, the narrator is a middle-aged college teacher living an ostensibly ordinary life in Honolulu. From looking at or talking with him, no one, not even his own daughter, would be able to imagine what he has been through—no one, that is, except fellow Korean immigrants of a similar age. The immigrant father, now safely ensconced in a middle class suburb, is tyrannized by his petulant daughter, who wants him to pay for an expensive music education in Italy. She invokes her dead mother, which triggers his memories of the war. The father recalls the terror and violence of his past experiences, remembering vividly how he wanted to run away and save himself when his baby daughter’s crying threatened to disclose his hiding place to enemy soldiers. His wife, who refused to leave the baby, was killed, but both he and the baby survived to live in another world, in another era. Now the howling baby has grown into a spoiled and demanding daughter who has no idea what makes her father give in.

Younghill Kang’s world is an immigrant “bachelor society” and Richard Kim’s is an exclusively male military world. Like Kim and many other men of that generation in Korea, Pak’s views of the world may have been deeply affected by his war experiences. The stories in Guilt Payment are mostly male-centered war and adventure stories. While some readers might find Pak’s action-oriented stories exciting, some might detect disturb-
ing and distracting manifestations of misogyny in them. Pak’s female characters are often described as seductive objects of male desire. Many are cast as female avengers, returning now perhaps to exact a price for male insensitivity and selfishness, imagined as shrieking shrews, shamans possessed by spirits, and frightening vampires. In story after story, Pak imagines the woman’s body raped, tortured, maimed, and mutilated. The wife in “Guilt Payment” dies with the jagged end of a beam “rammed through her chest” (17). In “Possession Sickness,” George’s wife Moonhee is unable to pass stool for a week, so that “[h]er clammy skin oozed and stank” (24). After she is possessed by spirits, a crowd gathers to spit and throw stones at her, knocking her to the ground bleeding. In “A Second Chance,” the protagonist embraces a casual lover so hard that her bones “crackle” as she moans “in pained delight” (117). Faced with a woman offering her body in exchange for her husband’s freedom, this man thinks of her as “inert and yielding, like a lump of mud.” Then he recalls “the body of a woman he’d seen near Hwachon with a stick driven up her vagina, half submerged in a swampy rice paddy and festooned with a ring of floating feces” (122).

In contrast with writings about male worlds that make little or no mention of the fate of women or objectify them as prostitutes and victims, women are the central characters in work by Sook Nyul Choi, Margaret Pai, and Kim Ronyoung. Choi’s Year of Impossible Goodbyes, which is set in northern Korea near the end of World War II when the Japanese colonizers were intensifying their exploitation of Korean resources and labor as part of their war effort, focuses specifically on the lives of women who have been mobilized for war materiel production at factories set up in their own homes by the Japanese. The novel ends with the family’s dramatic escape to southern Korea during the Korean War, thanks to the courage of women like Aunt Tiger. Choi’s second novel takes place among refugees in Pusan during the Korean War. The female protagonist, Sookan, decides that she cannot be satisfied with family life and traditional female roles and that fulfillment, resolution, and completion are not possible in Korea. The novel ends with her taking the government test for study abroad in a room full of men, some of whom glare at her, insulted that a female “dared to be there.” Even after she passes the examination and finds her name “amidst the long list of men’s names,” her brothers are so surprised that they call the Ministry of Education to make sure that there had been no mistake. “I knew that [everyone] had hoped I would give up, join my friends at Ewha [Women's] University, and then join the convent to be with my sister,” Sookan ruminates. To escape from these limitations, she boards a plane en route for America.

In both of these novels, America is seen as a promise or a promised land, especially for women. In Year of Impossible Goodbyes, the family members anxiously await the Americans, whom they expect will deliver them from Japanese oppression. Listening to recordings of “Clementine,” “Sewanee River,” and “Home On the Range,” Sookan imagines America vaguely as the place where she will no longer feel empty, restless, and incomplete.

III

The daughters of early, mostly working class Korean immigrants in Hawai’i and on the mainland have begun to imagine their parents’ lives in fiction and non-fiction accounts as well as in oral histories collected by researchers in recent years. But after all, the promised land hoped for in Choi’s novels is not what these second generation Korean American women writers describe.

Margaret K. Pai’s The Dreams of Two Yi-Min [Immigrants] (1989) traces five decades in the history of the author’s family in Hawai’i. In this first-person narrative, Pai (b. 1914) details the mother’s participation in the movement for Kore-
an independence from Japanese colonial rule, the father’s attempts to make a living, and the subtly strained relations between them as they struggle to establish their livelihood and raise their children in their adopted land. Although it is presented chronologically, Pai’s tale is not a simple developmental narrative celebrating the seamless integration of the immigrant into the fabric of American life. At the end of the book, the parents’ beloved homeland, no longer occupied by the Japanese, is divided in half as a Cold War battleground, and the father’s dream of bequeathing his furniture business to his children literally goes up in smoke shortly after his death.

*Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America* (1990) is supposed to be an autobiographical account of the life of Mary Paik Lee, who immigrated to America with her family in 1905 when she was five years old. The family’s “odyssey” takes them from Hawai’i to California and then all over California’s rugged agricultural and mining country in search of a livelihood during times of relentless poverty and race discrimination. The “odyssey” is “quiet” not because Paik Lee is given to excessive restraint but because the experiences and viewpoints of poverty-stricken Asian immigrants in early twentieth-century America have remained on the periphery of most American people’s consciousness. *Quiet Odyssey* insists on using the family story to criticize the society at large. The point of both *The Dreams of Two Yi-Min* and *Quiet Odyssey* was apparently not to express the writers’ individuality but rather to provide testimonial of the families’ experiences that would bring them into visibility, and provide social commentary about how American life has treated people it has rendered voiceless.

On the dust jacket of her 1987 novel, *Clay Walls*, Kim Ronyoung (1926-1989), also known as Gloria Hahn, wrote, “A whole generation of Korean immigrants and their American-born children could have lived and died in the United States without anyone knowing they had been here. I could not let that happen.” In *Clay Walls*, Kim presents a daughter’s perspectives on her immigrant parents’ changing and often conflicted notions about what being Korean in California meant in the decades between the two World Wars. The book purveys a sense of the nationalist spirit that made possible the psychic survival of the early Korean immigrants to the United States in their daily struggles with poverty and racism. Of particular interest to today’s readers is the portrayal of the mother’s mostly successful efforts to carve out a self-determined identity in America as a woman and as a Korean nationalist. Kim hints that this negotiation is possible because Haesu can take advantage of the interstitial position she occupies as a woman of aristocratic Korean background in what is to her, her husband, and her ethnic community a new land. The book also illustrates how successfully the immigrants passed on their fierce resistance to cultural extinction to their children, who did not directly experience Japanese colonialism because they were born in America. By arranging the book in sections representing mother, father, and daughter, Kim is able to bring the immigrant parents almost into dialogue with their American-born daughter, so that the daughter’s voice is not subordinated as she speaks with the parents instead of for them.

Contemporary Korean American women writers have problematized simple nationalism by bringing into view the vexed relationship between nationalism and feminism and by calling into question the notion of unitary identities. Although it was published in 1982, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s (1951-1982) *Dictee* was not widely read and appreciated as a Korean American work until the early 1990s, perhaps because of its polyvocality and the ambivalence that defines its politics. *Dictee* (1982) explores the incommensurable, invoking the Korean War as it thematizes the loss of the nation, a loss that is ambiguous and that provides the narrator with political grounds on which to speak simultaneously from a multi-
plicity of unevenly interpellated subject positions: as woman, as postcolonial subject, and as racialized US immigrant.

Cha identifies with Korean history and Korean unity by continually performing and bearing witness to Korea’s trauma. She incorporates Korea’s geography into her body, equating each “organ artery gland pace element, implanted, housed skin upon skin, membrane vessel, waters, dams, ducts, canals, bridges” (57). At the same time, she questions notions of congealed national identity:

From A Far

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

Cha also offers an anti-nationalist critique of masculinist nationalism:

You stand on your tanks your legs spread apart how many degrees exactly your hand on your rifle.... you are fixed you cannot move you dare not move. You are your post you are your vow in nomine patris you work your post you are your nation defending your country from subversive infiltration from your own countrymen.... you don’t hear. You hear nothing. You hear no one.... you see only prey.... you close your eyes to the piercing the breaking the flooding pools bath their shadow memory as they fade from you your own blood your own flesh as tides ebb, thorough you through and through (86).

In Dictee, Korea is divided from itself, each side claiming to be Korea. Like both northern and southern Korea, the personal and the ideological are mutually constituted as incommensurable and nonequivalent. Cha opens up a third space, perhaps for what David Lloyd has called a “nationalism against the state,” a revisionist Korean nationalism that critiques US imperialism:

Arrest the machine that purports to employ democracy but rather causes the successive refraction of her none other than her own...We are severed in Two by an abstract enemy an invisible enemy under the title of liberators who have conveniently named the severance, Civil War. Cold War. Stalemate. (81)

Attracted by Cha’s deployment of concepts such as multiplicity and indeterminacy, some post-structuralist critics have written about Dictee without considering the importance of her Korean American identity to the text. Dictee is a subversive text about a specific set of excluded experiences. Indeed, it undermines popularly accepted notions of genre and of history, and questions common assumptions about time, place, origins, and identity. By troubling the notion of progress from fragmentation to wholeness or from immigrant to citizen, Cha challenges the
US nationalist narrative. And by bringing Korea and Koreans into view after the damage done by Japanese colonization has been glossed over by history, she creates a space for justice as well as for difference:

To the other nations who are not witnesses, who are not subject to the same oppressions, they cannot know. Unfathomable the words, the terminology: enemy, atrocities, conquest, betrayal, invasion, destruction. They exist only in the larger perception of History’s recording, that affirmed, admittedly and unmistakably, one enemy nation has disregarded the humanity of another. Not physical enough. Not to the very flesh and bone, to the core, to the mark, to the point where it is necessary to intervene, even if to invent anew, expressions, for this experience, for this outcome, that does not cease to continue. (32)

Theresa Cha is arguably the most impressive and important Korean American writer in recent times. During her short life, she produced visual artwork that stretched the boundaries of Korean American literature by insisting on both heterogeneity and a specifically Korean ethnic identity.

IV

Emerging young Korean American writers and artists in the 1990s are continuing the legacy in different ways. The increasing hybridity and heterogeneity of Korean and Asian American identities — especially in Hawai‘i and among the children and grandchildren of pre-1965 immigrants — challenges old categories and notions of who can be called a Korean American writer. For many, what matters is only the wish to be so called, with “Korean American” being but one of many facets of identity. Alison Kim describes herself as “a Chinese Korean born in Hawai‘i and raised in California... a Virgo with a Scorpio moon and Virgo rising, an activist, a lesbian, a writer, and an artist.”

The voices of the several thousand laborers who immigrated to Hawai‘i at the turn of the century are represented in a small but very heterogeneous body of writings by their grandchildren. The grandson of Korean immigrants, Honolulu-born Gary Pak (b. 1952) published *A Ricepaper Airplane* about an outspoken Korean immigrant independence movement and union activist in Hawai‘i during the first half of the 20th century. What interests Pak is bringing to light the hidden, the forgotten, and the derogated, whether it is Asian labor leadership, Korean history, or the pidgin spoken in Hawai‘i.

For Pak and other Korean American writers in Hawai‘i, ethnic heritage is to be cherished. At the same time, it is not the only identity a person possesses:

I am a writer, a father of three, a husband, a son, a teacher, a soccer coach, a resident of Kaneohe. I am all of these. When I go to California, people say that I am Asian American or Korean American. I don’t mind this, because I am Asian American and Korean American. It would only bother me if being labeled that way were a put-down or a way to exclude me.

The characters in Pak’s collection of short stories, *The Watcher of Waipuna* (1992), belong to many different ethnic groups. Their ethnicities describe but do not define them. The narratives are infused with reminders of Hawai‘i’s blended “talk-story” traditions, but at the heart of the book lurk sinister suggestions of atrocities wrought by racism and greed, often seen opaque-ly by children. Always, though, Pak insists on the slender but luminous possibility that wrongs of the past might be righted and wrongs of the present halted. In “The Watcher of Waipuna,” Gilbert Sanchez’s insanity, as well as his good heart, saves the land from the developers. And although one of his sisters succumbs to greed, the other cannot bring herself to cheat her brother. In the end, she sacrifices what seems to be a golden opportunity
because she will not step on Gilbert to get ahead.

Since the mid-1980s, Pak and other local writers have been meeting to read and critique each other’s work. One of the members of the writers’ group is poet Cathy Song, author of *Picture Bride* and *Frameless Windows, Squares of Light*. Like Pak, Song cherishes and writes about her Chinese and Korean heritage and her roots in Hawai‘i. But she has said that she does not want to be read only through the lens of race and ethnicity, calling herself “a poet who happens to be Asian American.” Worried that her work was being regarded as “leaning too heavily on ‘the Asian-American theme,’” Song said in an interview, “I’ll have to try not to write about the Asian-American theme.... it is a way of exploring the past.... But I write about other things, too.”

Many of the poems in *Picture Bride* contain images of almost suffocating restriction: sunless rooms, a pressing against mesh screens like barbed wire, a mother who sleeps in tight blankets and peers almost fearfully through gray curtain of rain, fencing her children’s playground with her skirt hems, keeping them “under cover” within the “safe circumference” of the house. There are women “handcuffed” to China by jade bracelets or “squinting” in hot, still rooms, like Japanese dolls “encased in glass boxes/displayed like shrines,” their legs tucked under them, their world the piece of cloth they hold in their seamstress hands. While Song’s Korean and Chinese family and ethnicity provide inspiration and material for her poetry, as an artist she seems to be restricted by them. To become an artist, she must leave home; she can return to her ethnicity and family only by rendering them as aesthetically beautiful but voiceless images.

Hawai‘i-born, third-generation Korean American writer Willyce Kim (b. 1946) now lives and works in California, where her two wittily erotic mystery-adventure novels, *Dancer Dawkins and the California Kid* (1985) and *Dead Heat* (1988) are set. The main characters of *Dancer Dawkins* and *Dead Heat* are young lesbians who rescue their friends from danger. They are assisted by a middle-aged Korean woman from Hawai‘i. “Ta Jan the Korean” has reinvented and renamed herself. Born in Oahu as the descendant of a Korean immigrant worker and a picture bride, she is baptized Penelope Frances Lee, a name she detests because, she says, all this ancient Greek namesake ever did was wait and “weave, weave, weave.” At the height of the hippie movement, she heads for San Francisco with a suitcase full of marijuana and names herself Ta Jan. Now she operates an all-night diner called The Golden Goose, where she serves omelets, salads, curries, bagels with lox and cream cheese, and Lili‘uokalani Coolers, as well as a drink named after Martina Navratilova and a dessert named after Gertrude Stein.

Agreeing with Pak and Song that Korean heritage is but one of many facets of her identity, Kim also notes that she created Ta Jan the Korean because she wanted a character that could be recognized specifically as Korean American: “When I was a child, I remember that Koreans were sometimes classified as ‘others’ or lumped with Chinese or Japanese. I wanted Ta Jan to stand out as a Korean and not just a generic Asian American.”

There has been a spate of Korean American creative activity during the past decade. In that period, Korean Americans produced more films, exhibited more visual and performance art, and published almost as many novels, memoirs, and books of poetry as were published altogether during the preceding eight decades. Contrast of some kind is to be expected, since before 1965 race-based exclusion and containment policies kept the Korean population in the United States minimal. Moreover, dramatic increases in literary activity in the 1990s might be expected, since for the first time a sizable generation of US-educated Korean Americans fluent in English has come of
Their mostly middle class parents immigrated to the United States in particularly large numbers in the 1970s under US Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) professional and technical preference categories. Furthermore, receptivity to Korean American work also increased with shifts in the racial and ethnic makeup of the US population during the last two decades, which created new audiences for this work, and the pathways to publication and production had already been opened by other artists of color, mostly during the same period.

But in my view, the fierce and sudden bloom of Korean American cultural activity after the 1992 Los Angeles riots can be attributed in part to the crisis of representation and identity many Korean Americans experienced because of the 1992 Los Angeles riots, when they found themselves targeted by black and brown rage and inscribed widely in print and visual media not only as inarticulate aliens but also as racist, grasping ghetto merchants with thoughts of no one and nothing except themselves and their property. Many Korean Americans, particularly those belonging to the so-called “1.5 generation” wanted more than just visibility. They wanted to be the ones to define the terms of their visibility.

If current demographic trends continue—both in terms of immigration and birth rates—by the middle of this century, racial minorities will constitute a majority in many locales across America. In the age of advanced communication and transportation, we can expect the eyes of new Americans to be trained not on Europe but on the Pacific Rim. Yet many Americans are still fond of invoking “our European heritage.” Historically, Asian Americans have been seen as metonyms for Asia and forcibly distanced from US national culture, which defines the citizenry—that is, who can be American—as well as which histories and experiences can be brought in and which must be left at the door. They could respond to the frequent exhortation to go back where they came from, “We are here because you were there.” But Americans still do not learn much about the US’ role in Asia, and what is learned about American wars is invariably that it displays American valor. Perhaps the Korean War is not much mentioned in world history classes because American heroism could not be easily extrapolated from it. All that can be said has been that Americans, unable to save all of the Korean people from Communism, worked valiantly to rescue the prostitutes and adopt the orphans.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, the prostitutes and orphans are finally speaking back from the imperial center—in Korean American documentary films, such as The Women Outside, directed by J.T. Takagi and Hye Jung Park (1996), a film that explores how Korean women are lured and sold into military prostitution and what happens to some of those who marry US servicemen only to be abandoned to massage parlors and bars in the US. The prostitutes also speak back in books by Korean Americans, such as Beyond the Shadow of Camptown by Ji-Yeon Yuh, who interviews women married to US servicemen who live in small towns across the US, and Katherine Moon’s Sex Among Allies (1998), which traces the official role of the US government in Korean military prostitution.

The mixed-race children of Korean women and US military men in Korea are the central characters in Heinz Insu Fenkl’s Memories of My Ghost Brother (1996), which views at close range the US military presence in Asia as well as American racism during a period of poverty and weakness that many Koreans would prefer to forget. Fenkl’s book challenges racism in both Korean and US society, as seen in assumptions about the interchangeability of race and culture. The Koreans who people young Insu’s life are as far from the official versions representable in Korean patriarchal nationalism as they are from the “American dream.”

Thousands of Korean children have been ad-
opted by American families during the past 35 years. Until recently, the adoption story has been one of white American generosity, compassion, and largesse. But now, adoptees are growing up and beginning to speak back in English, in anthologies like Seeds From A Silent Tree, edited by Tonya Bishoff and Jo Rankin (1997), in the written and visual memoirs of Me-K Ahn. Ahn’s Living in Half Tones (1994), and films like Kim Su Theiler’s Great Girl (1993), Nate Adolfson’s Passing Through (1998), and Deann Borhsay’s First Person Plural (2000). These written and visual texts complicate the American adoption story of resolution with representations of racialization and othering in the host society that claims to have saved them. Adoptee texts also challenge Korean notions of hypostatized home.

In the United States, besides prostitutes and orphans, there has been little interest in the Korean War, considering how important it has been in both US and Korean history. I.F. Stone referred to the conflict in Korea as the “forgotten war.” Although the US national narrative disavows the fact of American military, economic, and cultural colonization of South Korea since the end of World War II, the Korean War shaped the most intimate aspects of material and psychic life for tens of millions of Koreans, including millions of Korean Americans, touching even those born long after the armistice or living on distant continents. Displaced and dislocated people have migrated to the very imperial center that disrupted their lives. But Korean immigration emerges directly from that war, though both movements are opaque to most Americans.

Mainstream American readers and critics might discourage Korean American writers from inscribing experiences that bring back what the US as a nation seeks to forget because they contradict the fictions of America as always benevolent abroad and inclusive at home. Instead, Korean American writing has been most marketable when it represents an exotic and implicitly inferior culture.

Nonetheless, the Korean War figures importantly in Korean American imaginative writing. Significantly, however, representations of the war in contemporary Korean American art foreground not so much the links between Korea and Korean Americans as the degree to which American racism trivializes the tragedy and reveals the enormous psychological distance between America and the racialized immigrant. Susan Choi’s The Foreign Student (1998) brings the forgotten war into view in depth and complex detail, shining floodlights on the little-known tragedy of Cheju Island, when between twenty thousand and sixty thousand young leftists were killed in the late 1940s. But, once transplanted in American soil, the war becomes opaque and unknowable. Asked to talk about the war by well-meaning but ignorant townspeople in Sewanee, Tennessee, the Korean exile is asked, “How did you people like that war we had for you?” He can only reply, “Very much.” (234) Called upon to talk about Korea in front of church groups, he always feels hopeless. He can never interpret or translate it. The gap between the exile and the Americans among whom he lives is unbridgeable. There is only incomensurability. Having served as a translator in South Korea, he had “thrived...in the zone of intentional misinformation,” (84) where now he is doomed to remain.

Until writers like Nora Okja Keller, Chang Rae Lee, and Susan Choi began to attract attention in the US, Korean American writings had not mattered much in Korea, except to the extent that they represent or refer to Korea. It seems to me that those few South Korean critics and scholars who do read Korean American literary work usually scan it for traces of the fatherland, recognizable themes and tropes such as portrayals of comfort women, longing for a hypostatized home, and stories of immigrant failure in America that demonstrate both punishment for those who left and vindication for those who stayed be-
hind. Perhaps they wish to see Korean immigrant failure and Korean American angst as reasons to congratulate themselves about the preferability of the their traditional culture and perhaps for their own decision not to emigrate.

Bringing such agendas to the texts means missing the US context of Korean failure and Korean American angst. In my view, Korean American stories are not only, or even mainly, about links between Korea and Korean Americans.

The title of Suji Kwock Kim’s award-winning Notes From the Divided Country, refers, I think, not just to divided Korea but also to divisions within the Korean American psyche. Intensely personal and emotional, Kim’s poems about the Japanese colonization, the Korean War, the flight of refugees from northern Korea, are her parents’, grandparents’, and great-grandparents’ stories. The narrator dreams of bile and blood, soldier-faced vultures, forests of corpses. She imagines her father trudging through mud and snow, racked with fever and frostbite, eating lice from his own body until his gums bleed. But, she writes:

I can only speak to you in broken things,
I can only speak in bullets, grenade-shards, mortar casings, and broken ROKA [Republic of Korea Army] barricades:

I know I’m orphaned,

I know you suffered, but I’ll never know how.

Finally, the narrator’s preoccupation is less with Korean history than with what she guesses are the expectations of the ghost father who visits her in her dreams “like a soul owl,” asking “what have you done with your life, who will you become, who, who, who?” (11)

These are personal appropriations of history, interspersed with pain of guilt over a mentally retarded brother, interest in neighbors’ gardening, delight at contemplating what an onion might say to its peeler, rage over racist characterizations of Asian women in the West.

Although some work by younger generations of Korean American writers is informed by national consciousness forged under colonial rule and civil war in the parents’ and grandparents’ generations, the key element is their experience of America, which involves the interplay of racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, social class, and colonial subjectivities. Chang Rae Lee’s Native Speaker (1995), Leonard Chang’s Fruit’n’Food (1996), and Patti Kim’s A Cab Called Reliable (1997) tease out the lines of affinity and difference between the Korean immigrant merchant and their Korean American offspring in racially charged contexts.

Like many other Korean American artists of her generation, Patti Kim refuses the American and the Korean demand that her writing serve as a bridge between the false binaries of Korea and America, East and West, here and there, then and now. Refusing the go-between, interpreter, bridge role, she mounts a critique of totalizing representations meant to describe the dominant and upends common assumptions about color, culture, and sexuality. I view the story as not about searching for Korean cultural roots but rather as claiming and articulating what has been disavowed as impeding the development of American citizenship.

How does the Korean American get her ideas about Korea and America? Ahn Joo, Kim’s protagonist, relies on the World Book Encyclopedia’s descriptions of Korean agrarian values, frozen in time and uncomplicated by contemporary political and social change. At the outset, the reader no doubt assumes that the Korean American girl’s classmates are white. But very gradually, we come to realize that they are African American. Ahn Joo pays no attention at all to African Americans as a group. In her world, it is they who are differentiated as individuals and who occupy the center.
of American life. It is they she wants to be like.

*A Cab Called Reliable* cuts through the notion of Asian Americans as a “model minority,” satirizes Orientalism, and interrogates the national myths of fairness, racial equality, and multiculturalist reconciliation. Instead of representing “black-Korean conflict,” *A Cab Called Reliable* undermines the notion of America as a multiracial haven of success for the hardworking immigrant. Kim’s novel offers no resolution, no reconciliation, no happy transformation of the immigrant alien into triumphant American citizen. The book ends with the daughter leaving her father, sick, worn out, and depleted of stories. Though her escape from the shadow of the immigrant is a poignant tragedy, she has no other options, just as she can never embrace the idea of “going back to Korea,” where she has never been.

Until the last decade of the 20th century, published Korean American writers were predominantly male. Recently women writers have begun to proliferate, not only because of increasing numbers of women readers and general heightened interest in women’s writings among readers in the US but also because the ratio of Korean American females to males was not balanced until after immigration quotas were changed in 1965. Whereas ninety percent of the immigrants to Hawai‘i at the turn of the century were men, now more women are immigrating to the US from Korea than men.

Thus a significant number of Korean American writers today are women, and consciousness of gender and power if not sexual orientation issues has made its way into the writing of many contemporary Korean American artists, such as novelists An Na, Suki Kim, and Ginger and Frances Park, poet Ishle Park, film maker Grace Lee, and visual artist Yong Soon Min.

I think we can expect to find continuing interest in US imperialism in Korean history, racism in immigrant life, and issues of gender and sexuality in family and society among Korean American writers in the new century. At the same time, there should be more focus on different ways of being Korean in America.

Not long ago, Indian writer Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* was favorably reviewed by a number of American literary critics who were certain that she had been influenced by Charles Dickens and William Faulkner, whose work Roy had in fact never read. In Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, female networks and lineages save women’s lives, and in the book Keller pays repeated tribute in terms of themes, images, and language to Asian American women writers who came before her: Maxine Hong Kingston, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Cathy Song, and Joy Kogawa.

Don Lee’s characters unselfconsciously inhabit a subtly gendered multi-racial, pan-Asian world. One of the first Korean American literary works of the millennium, Lee’s *Yellow* (2001) may be a signal work in terms of future directions for some Korean American creative expression. Lee’s locale, a fictional town on the northern California coast reminiscent of Half Moon Bay, is vividly specific. His characters are intelligent and accomplished, though often confused and poignantly lacking in self-awareness. “Yellow” could refer to cowardice and courage as well as to the racialization, however subtle and indirect, that the characters experience.

The collection has a novelistic quality because the stories are linked by theme and locale as well as by the pan-Asian American characters that reappear in different stories, which contribute to ongoing gender dialogues in Korean and Asian American culture. For the most part, Lee’s women are forceful women—articulate, successful, self confident, independent, and sexually assertive. Though appealing, they are for the most part drawn with a very broad brush. Lee’s men are more diverse and complex. For some, manliness is manifested in sports skills—surfing, fishing, boxing, golf—allowing Lee to display his impressive range of detailed knowledge of sports in
breathtaking passages describing his characters’ activities. Lee’s fantasy man, Phillip Han, is “like no Korean [you] had ever met”. Besides teaching hapkido and riding a Harley, Phillip Han wears a ponytail, aspires to be the next Bruce Lee, is “wild, fun, and very, very cool…terrible with money…an inveterate philander.” (113) When his wife catches him in bed with a pair of movie starlets, he calls her a “fat cow” and kicks her out. But most of Lee’s men are intimidated by the forceful women around them. Others are lonely and inhibited, sometimes to the point of paralysis, by fear of commitment, fear of losing their balance, like Duncan Roh, who after 100 lovers, mostly “Asian amazons,” still can’t find a woman who can rival the thrill of surfing.

The mostly American-born characters in Yellow claim space in everyday American life with their very human fears and desires. But while they might be culturally very American, they maintain “residual ethnic loyalties…and…also face subtle acts of discrimination” that inspire in them powerful feelings of ambivalence, frustration, and anger. For a time, it might seem “exotic” for Asian Americans to be “as individual and different, as sexy, artsy, feisty, athletic, articulate, neurotic, and screwed up as anyone else in America,” as Lee says he wanted to show. But the stories in Yellow insist on the self and subjectivity of Asian Americans: pushing aside the century-old stock Asian figures of the Western imagination—from sinister villains and dragon ladies to comical servants and nerdy automatons—Lee insists on the feelings and perspectives of his multi-dimensional characters, whether they are artists, venture capitalists, fishermen, big-wave surfers, poets, or public defenders.

Some might argue that there should be no such thing as “Korean American” literature, that to call writing by Korean Americans Korean American confines it to a narrow realm of ethnic identification that ignores its multicontextuality. But in everyday life in this paradoxical place where hundreds of cultures converge on an unprecedented scale, in this most beautiful but also this loneliest of countries where people are still at peril before the state and on the street for the way they look, I like to think that heritages and ethnicity offer both roots and wings. Immigrants to this country are expected to leave by the door memories and experiences that contradict the fictions that America tells about itself as being always benevolent abroad and inclusive at home. Bringing back these memories and experiences, these roots, can provide a blessed sense of belonging to history, a better understanding of justice perhaps, and the feeling of confidence that comes with knowing you are bringing gifts to the table. These gifts, these multifarious stories from alternative sites, have the power to transform what “America” is and does in the world.

In this sense, roots make wings possible. Among these gifts are works of art that might or might not refer directly to those memories and experiences that are quite unselfconsciously rooted in them. Thus Korean American literature, as for Korean Americans, can be thought about as being both Korean American and American. By American I don’t mean what older generation Korean immigrants mean when they say paekin for “American.” I don’t think of America as a sea of undifferentiated whiteness into which we all disappear, but rather as an enormous expanse of water, land, and sky of diverse hues, textures, and perspectives, including the visions and fierce dreams of people from many heritages and ethnicities, a heterotopia that we traverse, our lives intersecting with those of other gift bearers. And all the while, the circuitry of our material and psychic travels knit what we call the American terrain into a richly discontinuous weave with the homelands of all our bodies and imaginations.

Recently, I co-edited a new anthology of Korean American writing with Laura Hyun Yi Kang titled Echoes Upon Echoes. These new writings are set in unexpected places—fat farms, sum-
mer camps, buses, log cabins in the snow, North Korea, Norway, Kenya. The eccentric landscapes and mindscapes depicted in these writings attest to tension between habitation within and movement across strange terrains, communities, and languages. Korean American writers and artists will continue to cross some boundaries and maintain others as they struggle to create a new culture from the jumbled elements of US and Korean life.

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Endnotes

In the past year or so there have been numerous high profile Korean American works visible in commercial literary contexts. The New York Times Book Review, in fact, just covered Susan Choi’s second novel, American Woman, this week. Suki Kim’s first novel, The Interpreter, was also covered in The New York Times Book Review. Linda Sue Park’s Young Adult novel, A Single Shard, won last year’s prestigious Newbery Award and her books are so successful that they are now practically ubiquitous in the children’s section of Barnes & Noble. Nora Okja Keller’s second novel, Fox Girl, and Don Lee’s short story collection, Yellow, were also recent prominent works coming from the mainstream presses.

The past couple of years have also seen the publication of anthologies such as Kori: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Fiction (2001), which I co-edited with Walter K. Lew; Century of the Tiger: One Hundred Years of Korean Culture in America 1903-2003, a special issue of the journal Manoa co-edited by Jenny Ryun Foster, Frank Stewart and myself; Echoes Upon Echoes: New Korean American Writings (2003), from the Asian American Writers Workshop, edited by Elaine Kim and Laura Kang; Yobo: Korean American Writing in Hawai‘i, an anthology from Bamboo Ridge, for which Nora Okja Keller was one of the co-editors (along with Brenda Kwon, Sun Nam-kung, Gary Pak, and Cathy Song); and finally, Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean-American Literature 1903-2003, edited by Yearn Hong Choi and Haeng Ja Kim. Most of these collections were timed to correspond with this year’s centennial of Korean immigration to the United States.

Also currently in the pipeline or just recently released by small presses are three works that represent other new directions and trends. Jane Jeong Trenka’s memoir, The Language of Blood (2003), was published by Borealis, an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society Press; Gary Pak’s next novel, with the working title Children of a Fireland, will be released by University of Hawai‘i Press probably next year; and also a strange collection of stories and essays by Minsoo Kang, a graduate student in History at UCLA, called Of Tales and Enigmas, will be released later this year by Prime Books, a small fringe press that specializes in edgy and innovative Science Fiction and Fantasy. This book is especially interesting because it doesn’t even fit the niche in which it is being published.

II: Self-reference and Genrefication

When an initially marginal literature finally establishes itself as prominent through a combination of critical recognition in the academy and commercial success in the mainstream (Korean American writers are a veritable Who’s Who of award winners), future works in that category tend to demonstrate a heightened self-consciousness of their subtexts. The works tend to become intertextual performances, and the intertextuality
begins to cross the boundaries of genre and form. This is especially true these days with the increasing prevalence of mixed-media and web-based works (which are typically a mixture of still and moving visual images, sound, and text).

In the early days of Korean American literature, when Younghill Kang was the only significant voice, there was no model, no set of preexisting Korean American subtexts to which new Korean American writers could make explicit or implicit allusion. Kang's own subtexts were a complex combination of classical and canonical Asian and European works, and his mode of allusion was not adequately understood by his audience at the time. Today, texts like *The Grass Roof* (1931) and *East Goes West* (1937) seem more innovative because, due to the trends in transcultural and comparative literary studies, we can more readily see what Kang was doing. But at the same time, Kang's tropes, now that they are more visible, have also lost some of their original subtlety.

When Richard Kim wrote thirty years later, he was seen as alluding to European Existentialism. He was often compared to Camus, for example, especially for *The Martyred* (1964) because his readers were not aware of how modern Korean literature had engaged with European philosophical traditions, particularly where their intersection with Christianity was concerned, and how a writer could resonate with European philosophy while alluding to Korean subtexts. *The Martyred* and *The Innocent* (1968) can now be read, and are read by some, in the reformed Korean academy, as postwar Korean literature in the same vein as Kim Sung-ok's "Seoul, 1964, Winter."

There is a large lacuna between Richard Kim and the next prominent Korean American writer, Kim Ronyoung. Her novel, *Clay Walls* (1986), which in many ways is a very Korean work in the particular way it merged autobiography and fiction, was one of the only Korean American text used in college courses for many years after the Asian American explosion of the late 1970s. This was after Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976) had pretty much single-handedly opened up a new category of writing now known as Asian American literature. These days, for Korean literary scholars, *Clay Walls* fits nicely into the history of Korean literature as an example of *kyopo munhak*.

Between the early prominent Korean American male/masculine literary presences like Younghill Kang and Richard Kim and the new generation of diverse voices that emerged in the mid '90s, there was an important—and for a time relatively unknown—transitional figure. This is the artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose book, *Dictee* (1982), literally came out of left field in 1982. *Dictee* was a work that defied classification when it appeared and continues to be a deeply resonant and iconic touchstone in Korean American letters today, more than two decades later.

Cha's work, as you know, was influenced by French Feminism, particularly by the work of writers like Monique Wittig and by Avant Garde film. *Dictee* was presented in an enigmatic form; it included historical Korean photos, an acupuncture diagram paralleled with constellations, and calligraphy. These components were arranged into a sort of postmodern collage that defied classification and yet resonated with a range of literatures and tropes. Readers could not explain why it was so captivating. Some became almost obsessed with *Dictee*, which was taught in a surprising range of courses including Feminist theory, Asian American literature, Lesbian literature, and Postmodern theory.

In sharp contrast to Cha, whose work, despite its high status, still resides in the periphery, is Chang-rae Lee, the most prominent Korean American writer currently in the literary mainstream. His first novel, *Native Speaker* (1995), was, as you probably recall, deceptively marketed as the first Korean American novel (despite the fact that Younghill Kang's works were bestsellers published by Scribners and edited by Maxwell
Perkins, the editor of Ernest Hemingway), and it was, in fact, a novelty in ethnic literature. Native Speaker was an odd hybrid, combining the qualities of a—by then—typical Asian American memoir/novel and political espionage thriller. This combination proved to be marketable and accessible even to an audience not inherently interested in ethnic literature.

Leonard Chang takes this marketable hybridity to the next level of popular accessibility with his third novel, Over the Shoulder (2001), a sort of consciously Hollywoodized amplification of the tropes in Native Speaker, more story-centered and less self-reflective, yet with a lightly veiled ironic or sarcastic symbolism. His publisher marketed it as a mystery novel, and Chang has embraced his new identity as a genre writer.

When we get to novels like Suki Kim’s The Interpreter (2003), what we find is another interesting sort of hybrid work, borrowing its central premise from “The Court Reporter,” a short story by Ty Pak, which appeared in his collection Moonbay (1999). To the story of a young Korean American interpreter who finds herself in an unexpected position of power and moral conflict, Kim applies a more conventional story of a misguided and disaffected woman searching for love and identity.

Nora Okja Keller’s Fox Girl (2002), which is a kind of historical extension of the elegant Comfort Woman (1997), draws on both Asian American subtexts and Korean subtexts, (those available in English translations). Some of the details and background of Fox Girl come from Korean short stories: O Chong-hui’s “Chinatown” and Kim Chi-won’s “Days and Dreams,” both translated by Bruce and Ju Chan Fulton in their collection Words of Farewell (1989). The conscious use of modern Korean literary subtexts is something relatively new—and an evolution, I think, from the typical use of historical and ethnographic research among this generation of Korean American writers. These literary allusions are, of course, invisible to the mainstream American reader, but for Korean scholars, they are far more resonant than for the western scholar, who might simply look at a novel like Fox Girl in an Asian American trajectory.

In the world of mainstream publishing there is a tacit demand for easy accessibility that causes editors to encourage (or enforce) the kind of writing that we in the academy would like to view as a thing of the past. For example, Marie Lee’s early works (like Finding My Voice [1994]) have set up expectations for a particular kind of Korean American ethnic identity novel. So successfully, in fact, that despite many attempts to write more literary “adult” fiction Lee found herself trapped for more than a decade in the Young Adult category she had herself helped create. Lee recently succeeded in placing her first adult book, Somebody’s Daughter—a complex work that examines both the mother’s and daughter’s side of a Korean adoptee narrative—by approaching Beacon, a small press with an imprint for literary works by women of color.

Although relatively complex works like An Na’s A Step from Heaven (2002) are finally beginning to emerge in the Young Adult category, they are still overshadowed by works typified by those of Linda Sue Park, which are sincere, but which buy into the demands of mainstream publishing. For example, Park’s Newbery Award-winning book, A Single Shard (2001), is a story built around the history of celadon production. Park does not read Korean and does not know much about Korean history or literature. Her research for the history of Korean celadon is limited to common sources available in a good public library—adequate for a children’s book, but superficial by academic standards. But the story and the rendition of Korean culture and language—all accessible to a young reader—exemplify the kind of exotification and Orientalism that makes literary scholars wince.

Asian American literature has become, de facto, a genre as far as the publishing business is
concerned, with some unintended consequences in the academy. To give a particularly ludicrous example, I located two Asian American literature courses in which David Guterson's *Snow Falling on Cedars* (1994) was taught as an Asian American novel because the professors had simply assumed, from the way the book had been marketed, that the author was Asian American. One of the professors rationalized the error by saying that Guterson's book *was* an Asian American novel, but that we needed to define Asian American differently. By these terms, if “Asian American” is a genre label, then other white writers like Danielle Steele—who also has a novel dealing with the Japanese American internment experience—can write it as well, in the same way that writers of any race may write a Mystery or Science Fiction novel. Such rationalization presents a troubling, somewhat “in your face” redefinition of our inquiry.

But ironically, the strange logic of mainstream publishing has also helped give rise to a large and diverse range of expression in the category of Asian American, among which Korean Americans have tended to be especially innovative.

### III: Self-redefinition and Interstitiality

Recent Korean American works have been quite diverse in a way that resists the kind of essentialist typecasting of writers (and their subject matter) characteristic of the publishing business. Don Lee’s short story collection, *Yellow* (2003), represents this trend very well. Lee writes with a clear awareness not only of what is going on in Asian American literary expression in general, but also of what is happening in the literary mainstream. Some of his stories have a deceptively slick, entertaining, and accessible surface; and while they perform many of the same self-reflective tropes one finds in earlier memoirs and memoir-like novels, those tropes are performed very differently. Under the surface, one often detects a sly subversion of reader’s expectations.

Other Korean American writers have tried to move away from ethnic typecasting in more overt ways. Both Chang-rae Lee and Susan Choi have Japanese Americans as central characters in their most recent novels. Franklin Hata, the main character in *A Gesture Life* (1999), is a Japanese of Korean ancestry (and in his next novel, *Aloft*, Lee’s narrator is not Asian). The central character in *American Woman* (2003) is Jenny Shimada, a Japanese American based on Wendy Yoshimura, the SLA member assigned to watch Patty Hearst while she was held captive in the mid-1970s. *American Woman* is almost a public expression of the Choi’s redefinition of her own identity as a writer.

With her first novel, *The Foreign Student* (1998), Choi had been classified, much against her will, as an Asian American writer. The content of *The Foreign Student*, whose main character is a Korean man, made that classification inescapable. When she spoke at the Korea Society last year in conjunction with Ty Pak and me at a reading from the *Kori* anthology, Choi said she saw herself more as a Southern writer and a Jewish writer than as a Korean American writer, a label she finds too limiting. (Chang-rae Lee and Leonard Chang have also expressed similar sentiments regarding the labeling of ethnic writers in numerous interviews.)

Obviously, such definition and redefinition of the writerly self plays out in sharply different ways according to context. For Korean academics continuing to struggle with the legacy of recent colonial history and nationalist politics, gestures such as Choi’s and Chang-rae Lee’s self-redefinition might seem especially charged, particularly when they write novels that focus on Japanese American characters.

Meanwhile, there are Korean American writers who have continued to push boundaries in other ways that make their works increasingly interstitial. Let me give you a quick definition of the
term “interstitial” because it is distinctly different from “hybrid.” “Interstice” literally means “to stand between,” and it generally refers to the space between things. Interstitial works are those that go beyond concepts like hybridity and liminality; interstitial writing defies genre classification or attempts at high concept descriptions that merely rely on a merging of two or more forms or qualities. In the mainstream world there are numerous works that have a high concept hybrid quality. Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, for example, could be pitched as an ethnic memoir combined with an espionage novel, thereby appealing to a readership larger than that of a single-genre work, but an interstitial work resists being categorized that way because it is too complex to classify as a mere combination of two or more things. Theresa Cha’s *Dictee* is a superb case in point. There are so many potential engagements that it’s impossible and, in fact, counterproductive to attempt to define *Dictee* as a particular thing in terms of mere hybridity or intersection. The most insight-ful explication of *Dictee* has been a response—in kind, Walter K. Lew’s *Excerpts from: Ikth Dikte, for Dictee* (1992).

For literary scholars, the term “liminality,” as used in the field of cultural studies might be more familiar, so let me refer to it as a starting point for understanding the kind of interstitiality one finds in Korean American writing, since it also relies on the notion of interstices. In his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha says, “It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nation-ness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated.” For ethnic literatures, the key term here is “negotiated.” Later in the introduction, Bhabha says:

> How are subjects formed ‘in-between’, or in excess of, the sum of the ‘parts’ of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)? How do strategies of representation or empowerment come to be formulated in the competing claims of communities where, despite shared histories of deprivation and discrimination, the exchange of values, meanings and priorities may not always be collaborative and dialogical, but may be profoundly antagonistic, conflictual and even incommensurable?

And finally:

The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, on-going negotiation that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.

All of what Bhabha says above applies very directly to interstitiality, one of the increasingly visible features of recent Korean American literature. But keep in mind that whereas liminality suggests an eventual arrival at another state, one of the underlying impulses of interstitial works is to remain poised in that in between state.

Let me give three examples, beginning with the work of Minsoo Kang.

*Of Tales and Enigmas* (2004) is a combination of strange stories and essays reminiscent of the works of Jorge Luis Borges, though many of Kang’s pieces draw from Korean history and Korean popular culture. The pieces in Kang’s collection are purposely enigmatic. They resonate with multiple cultures, they are open-ended, and they don’t resolve themselves with a conventional plot. Contemporary stories are combined with elements of traditional folktales; the tragic tale of the Virgin Arang is recast as a kind of urban legend in the vein of the American vanishing hitchhiker legends—the ghost of a young woman seduces a man, thereby saving his life while she fulfills her Confucian mission so that her spirit can move on. The final piece in the collection, “Kyongbok Palace: History, Controversy, Geomancy,” is an essay in the old sense of the word, reminiscent of Montaigne. Instead of pursuing a thesis, it en-
gages in an interwoven exploration of ideas about geomancy and feng shui, describing the dismantling of the large Japanese administrative building that used to obstruct the view of Chongro. Kang refers to rumors (or perhaps they were only legends) about how the Japanese had sent geomancers to interrupt the flow of Korea’s national ch’i by driving metal spikes into the tops of certain mountains. But at the end of the essay, though he points out that six thousand mysterious metal spikes were found in the foundation of that building when it was dismantled, he leaves the question open-ended.

*Of Tales and Enigmas* was not classifiable into an easy marketing category, and Kang could not place it with a mainstream press. It is being published by Prime Books, a press most noted for its fringe Science Fiction (and it doesn’t even fit easily into their line). It is fortunate that there are now regional and small presses that can take a risk on an idiosyncratic work like Kang’s, and it will be interesting to see how this work will be reviewed—whether the literary community or the Asian American community will even register it on their radar.

Jane Jeong Trenka’s memoir, *The Language of Blood*, is another example of the kind of interstitial work that has begun to emerge, but this one is more accessible, and its major influences can be traced directly back to *Dictee* and prominent trends in more mainstream Asian American fiction. For example, the book opens with the same epigraph that begins Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan* (1981). But whereas Kogawa is purposely vague about attributing the text (for thematic reasons), Trenka gives the specific chapter and verse. Trenka’s memoir is presented as an intermingling of various forms—an ethnic identity jigsaw puzzle, a menu, a screenplay—with chapter division in unglossed Chinese characters. Each single structural feature is one locatable in an earlier prominent Asian American work in the past fifteen years. But the general architecture of Trenka’s accessible memoir gestures specifically toward *Dictee*, a much more enigmatic predecessor, as if to remedy *Dictee*’s impenetrability while pointing to it as relevant to Trenka’s own particular notion of identity. Once again, we can see why such a book would be published by a small regional imprint and not a mainstream press. A mainstream editor would find *The Language of Blood* too complex for a memoir, a category of writing with a high truth claim and allowing for only a small amount of experimentation (particularly for the ethnic writer).

Gary Pak’s novel-in-progress, *Children of a Fireland*—with its stream of consciousness, newspaper clippings, and teleplays—is structurally similar to *The Language of Blood* but, as a narrative, it comes very solidly out of a local Hawai’ian tradition. (If we look at Pak’s earlier works, *The Watcher of Waipuna and Other Stories* [1992] and *Ricepaper Airplane* [1998], we can see the trajectory of Pak’s literary experimentation.) *Children of a Fireland* begins as a mystery story that at first appears to account for the supernatural in a rational way, but as it continues, the novel undermines that expectation in refreshing ways. Not only do we ultimately get a ghost story, but it is one intimately familiar with popular culture subtexts (*The X-Files*, the Hollywood film *Ghost*) and the Hawai’ian shamanic tradition. And underneath its interstitial structure, *Children of a Fireland* is a deeply humanistic novel that gives life to a community of working class people.

**IV: The Role of the Korean Academy & New Definitions of Korean American**

For a long time, Korean American writers like Younghill Kang and Richard Kim were not recognized as Korean writers because they wrote in English. The Korean academy went through phases during which it was sometimes even hostile to them. But recently, there has been a marked change in the academic atmosphere and Korean
American writers are finally welcome under a new and more inclusive vision of Korean literature.

Dafna Zur of the University of British Columbia characterizes this new attitude in her essay “Covert Language Ideologies in Korean American Literature.” Zur points out that, in recent years, Korean scholars have begun to “graciously embrace Korean American writers as an obvious and natural part of Korean literature.” They now feel that “Korean American literature is a branch of Korean literature written in English but nonetheless Korean in the issues discussed.” That is to say, to the Korean academy, Korean American literature is now Korean Anglophone literature, a classification that doesn’t quite make sense to some American scholars.

Zur summarizes the three main points of this new attitude in the Korean academy:

1. That Korean American literature has an educational, didactic value to it, in that it informs non-Korean readers about Korea (by employing, for example, Korean words and phrases in the English text);

Those of you at the reading last night at the Smithsonian probably noticed that all three of us who read from our fiction did this. But in light of some of the works I have discussed above, the next two points seem somewhat limiting:

2. That Korean American literature attests to and performs ‘Koreanness’ thus preserving Korean culture for future generations to come; and that

3. Korean American literature is a part of Korean literature because it discusses issues relevant to Korean culture, namely the process of immigration and the negotiation of identities of Koreans abroad.

The tacit definition applied to Korean American literature by American scholars is that it is writing, in English, by Americans of Korean origin. It is typically assumed that this writing is somehow connected to issues of ethnicity or at least includes a character or narrator who is Korean or Korean American. Whether this literature serves the interests of Koreans is not generally an issue. In light of the above, the work that best characterizes the three considerations of the Korean academy is probably not what the Korean or American academics had in mind.

If you follow the Korean rhetoric back to America, it brings us to the anthology *Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean-American Literature 1903–2003*, whose contents were translated from Korean into English (perhaps its most remarkable feature). This type of writing is a category likely to become more prevalent in the near future.

In the Afterword to *Surfacing Sadness*, Yearn Hong Choi, one of the coeditors, implicitly defines Korean American literature as works by Korean Americans written in Korean, which goes contrary to the general view that Korean American literature is written in English. Choi also reveals a nationalist rhetoric quite familiar to those in Korean literary studies. He says, “In the intellectual void of the 1970s and 1980s, Korean poets and writers in the United States published their works in Korean language newspapers, attended Korean churches utilizing their native language, and organized Korean literary societies in metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles; Washington, D.C.; New York; Atlanta; Chicago; and San Francisco.” He goes on to talk about some of these literary movements and their products, such as Jipyongsun, Miju Munhak, Woollim, Munhak Saega, and Oaegi, but it is the last two titles that have a distinctly odd and exciting sound to them: Washington Munhak and New York Munhak. These are all venues through which Korean Americans writing in Korean can get published, but the titles of the...
last two finally represent, and draw long-overdue attention to, the increasing international culture of Koreans and Korean Americans.

Choi has a set of complaints, partially directed at the American academy. For example, he says, “I was greatly disappointed by Marshall Pihl’s total ignorance of Korean Literature in the United States, even though he was one of America’s most prominent Korean scholars.” Choi also complains about Cornell University’s East Asia Series, which publishes Korean novels and poetry collections, “but [has] yet to publish Korean American literature.” He talks about Korean Studies programs and literature courses in which classic works like the Ch’unhyangjon and Hong’giltongjon are studied but contemporary Korean American works are not. He says that “the students’ parents are paying their sons’ and daughters’ tuition yet they are not introduced to their parental works at all. This is a sad state.”

Choi’s concerns exemplify how the rhetoric and the definitions can be surprisingly disjunctive even when they appear to refer to things that fall into the same category. But his concerns also draw much needed attention to the complex layers of politics concerning Korean American literature.

V: Conclusion

The interests of Korean American writers, Korean scholars and critics, American scholars and critics, the Korean and American readerships, and finally, the publishers, are interwoven in complex ways. As I’ve shown, even something that appears as relatively straightforward as the definition of Korean American becomes quite complex in light of particular contexts and the interests they represent.

Writers like Susan Choi may (and probably will) end up entirely shifting categories as far as the world of publishing is concerned. Her trajectory and Chang-rae Lee’s (and even Leonard Chang’s) might be characterized as a literary evolution but also as a suggestion that Korean American writers are successfully assimilating into the mainstream of American literature, writing simply as writers and not as ethnic writers. Choi, Lee, and Chang have all expressed this desire in the first place. How critics, academics, and readers respond to such gestures remains to be seen, but it is clear that Korean American writers are attempting to have more control over their public personae. As they engage their various readerships, the controversy and discourse generated by their works will only increase the vitality of Korean American literature.

Publishing has changed quite markedly even in the past five years, and I think we will be seeing many more experimental and unclassifiable works coming from small fringe presses and some even through self-publication via print-on-demand technology. This means that the mainstream publishers, critics, and academics’ control over literary representation will diminish as regional, local, and even neighborhood presses re-emerge.

Perhaps it is my own wishful projection, but one thing I look forward to is a renewed vitality like that of the old mimeograph culture, the ’zine culture of Factsheet Five, or the samizdat of the former Soviet Union—writing that isn’t simply out to make money or establish reputations, but to be read, to be responded to in kind. That is what I hope will characterize Korean American literature in the future.
My mother was born during Japan’s occupation of Korea. For most of her childhood, Japanese was the official language of the country. The village school she attended demanded the students speak only Japanese; public officials and market owners were required to conduct business in a language that was not their own.

Korean was forbidden and whoever was caught speaking it was severely punished. To keep their jobs, to keep from being beaten and sent to prison, my mother and her family were forced to speak a language that twisted their tongues and soured their stomachs.

But my mother says she spoke Korean anyway, in secret, with family and trusted friends, in the home, in the fields, or in the hills above the river. With whispered defiance, they kept the true language of their hearts alive.

After World War II, the Japanese left and the Americans came. People were allowed to speak Korean again, but quickly had to learn yet another language as the Americans swarmed into the country. These new foreigners even visited my mother’s small village.

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When my mother and father—a military engineer from Ohio—met, they could only say a handful of words to each other. Apparently, that was enough, for three months later they were married. He taught her the words for “love” and “freedom” and—when it became time for them to leave Korea—“goodbye.”

My mother was excited to travel to America, but once here became very homesick. The only one she could talk to besides my father was a dog, a boxer named Sally. Sally, though she never broke the habit of soiling the kitchen rug, eventually learned enough Korean to sit when my mother said, “Uhn-joh,” and to cock her ears when my mother complained. “I cried every day to that dog,” she said, “until your father said we could go back to my home.”

I was born during that return to Seoul, but after three years, my father had to return to the States. My mother and I followed, first to Minnesota and then to Florida. Again, my mother had no one to speak to—except for a toddler just learning the basics of language.

My mother, thinking to take pity on me, decided to stop speaking to me in Korean, to spare me the isolation she felt. “I didn’t want to confuse you,” she recently said to me. “I didn’t want you to feel what I felt.” In her mind, there would be no doubt: America would be my home; English would be my one language.

But her decision tore something away from both of us, created a rift in a previously seamless bond. From an early age, it seems, I learned to recognize that language could be used to manipulate and defeat. Talking fast, I could maneuver my way out of chores and renegotiate rules like bedtime. I was clever with words, my mother says, talking rings around her stumbling attempts at understanding.
Only when we moved to Hawai‘i was my mother able to find a community of Korean speakers. By then, I refused to learn Korean. Language continued to divide us, just as it had divided—more than once—the country of her birth.

I have to remember that I was also born in Korea, that I was weaned on kimchee. A good baby, I was able to eat anything, my mother told me. But what I especially loved was kimchee and rice, which my mother would chew, then spit onto a spoon for me. I wouldn’t eat, she has said, without that added mother flavor.

In my earliest memories, I am sitting cross-legged on the counter next to our kitchen sink, watching my mother rinse cabbage she had soaked in salt the night before. After patting the leaves dry, she slathers on the thick red pepper sauce, rubs garlic and green onion into the underarms of the cabbage, bathing it as she would one of her own children. Then, grabbing them by their dangling, leafy legs, she pushes the wilting heads into gallon size mayonnaise jars, rising up on tiptoe to punch the kimchee to the bottom of the jar, submerging them in their own juices.

The whole time, I would sneak licks as if swiping frosting from a cake. Even though my eyes watered from the taste of heat, I would still want more. I was passionate about kimchee, relishing the taste, the smell, the sting of it on my tongue.

Throughout elementary school, my sisters and I would eat kimchee every day after school. We would gather in the garage, wrestle one of the gallon-sized jars of kimchee from the outside refrigerator, and sit cross-legged around the jar as though at a campfire or a séance.

Daring each other on, we would pull out long strips that we would eat straight, without rice or water to soak up the heat and dilute the taste. Our eyes would tear and our noses start to run because it was so hot, but we could not stop. “It burns, it burns, but—mashisoo!—it tastes so good!” we would cry.

Afterward we would play the jukebox, a dol-
other version, I retorted faster than a blink: “Oh yeah? Well, you smell like a monkey.”

At the very least, I thought, I should have said something that day. Anything—a curse, a joke, a grunt—anything at all would have been better than a smile.

I just smiled. And sniffed. I smiled and sniffed as I walked to the locker room and dressed for P.E. I smiled and sniffed as I jogged around the field, trying to avoid the other girls charging after soccer balls. I smiled and sniffed as I showered and returned to class.

I became obsessed with sniffing. When no one was looking, I lifted my arms and—quick—sniffed. I held my palm up to my face and exhaled to sniff at my own breath. Maybe, every now and then, I caught a whiff of garlic or pepper. But I couldn’t tell for sure; the smell of kimchee was too much a part of me.

I decided I didn’t want to smell like a Korean. I wanted to smell like an American, which supposedly meant having no smell at all. Americans, as I learned from TV commercials and magazines, erased the scent of their bodies with cologne and deodorant, mints and mouthwash.

I erased my smell by eliminating kimchee. Despite how much I loved it, how much I craved it—my first food, my first memory—I stopped eating kimchee. I became ashamed of it and told everyone, my mother included, that I wasn’t Korean, but American. And though at one time it was what she claimed she wanted, I have no doubts, as a mother myself now, that this rejection was painful, that it cut away at something inside of her.

The older I get, the more I feel a sense of loss at these divisions between my mother and myself, between the Korea and America that exist not on the map but within myself. I grieve that I do not know my mother’s language or her history. I don’t even know how to make kimchee.

My youngest daughter is three, the same age I was when I left Korea. She is very verbal and I think I must have been that way, too, in Korea, speaking Korean with a child’s easy if imperfect grace.

I, however, have no recollection of that time. But if it is true that language provides the framework in which we store our past, re-learning Korean would open those earliest years of my life to me, unlocking a small treasure chest of memories.

When my mother visits now, I ask her to teach me to cook bulgogi and mandoo, kimchee chige and miyuk-kook. I ask her to speak to my girls and myself in Korean. If she was at first confused by my request—this from the teenager whose favorite food was McDonald’s and who once teased her for having an accent—she gave no sign and, with indulgence, began reciting the alphabet.

My daughters pick things up quickly—their minds flexible enough to encompass duality—able to assimilate multiple words for the same object. But I struggle, barely able to remember the lesson from the day before.

Sometimes, I eavesdrop from outside the girls’ bedroom door, listening as my mother and my children play school in two languages. I admit I feel a little like I did when I was a child, trying to understand what my mother and her Korean friends gossiped and laughed about, catching only bits and pieces of their conversation, an outsider in my own home—what, in fact, my own mother must have felt when she first came to America.

But mostly what I feel listening to my daughters and mother play is a sense of completion, of a circle closing, a rift being healed. Hearing my mother speak her first language to her grandchildren, making it one of their languages as well, just feels right—like finally coming home.

I suppose this is, at least in part, why I write: to heal rifts, to bridge divisions—both personal and political. I have, more than once, said that my first novel, Comfort Woman, is in part an apology to my mother for all the times in my adolescence that I rejected her.
When I was a student at University of Hawai‘i, and just beginning to think of myself as a writer, I enrolled in an Asian American literature class. I wanted to find role models for my own writing. I wanted to learn more about the literary tradition I hoped to one day fit into. In that class, I was introduced to Jade Snow Wong and Monica Sone, Maxine Hong Kingston and Lawson Inada. And it was liberating, intoxicating to discover writers grappling with the same issues of duality that I was. But by the end of the semester, I wondered where the Korean American writers were.

So one day after class, I asked the professor if there were any Korean American writers. And she said, “No.” And I kind of slumped and went away feeling dejected and cast adrift without any ties. But the next day, she found me and said, “You know what, I was thinking and there is one—one!—Korean American writer you could read. Cathy Song. But she’s Chinese-Korean.”

“That’s fine!” I said, so grasping and grateful for that one name. “I’m hapa, too.”

Cathy was the only Korean American writer this professor of Asian American literature had mentioned. For so long, I thought she might have been the only Korean American published and it wasn’t until years later that I discovered how many countless others—like Theresa Cha and Kim Ronyoung, Richard Kim, and Younghill Kang—went unrecognized. Silenced.

I’m drawn to silences; or, more precisely, to the stories and voices hidden by those silences. Perhaps because some of my own family’s stories were silenced—sometimes because of shame, of which I was once guilty; sometimes because of necessity, for survival—I feel compelled to write through the silences to the stories underneath.

Silence—and the breaking of silence—lay at the heart of Comfort Woman.

In the spring of 1993, I got a call from a girlfriend who was then a reporter for one of Hawai‘i’s papers. “There’s going to be a Korean woman lecturing at a human rights symposium,” she told me, and she might have used the term “comfort woman.” But back then I had never even heard the of term—I had no idea what it meant—and, if anything, I probably thought the lecture would be about the role of women in traditional Korean society.

Needless to say, I was totally unprepared for what the speech was actually about. The speaker was Keum Ju Hwang, a woman in her late 60’s who easily could have been my grandmother. She stood demurely at the podium and gathering strength as she went along, began to speak of a history that I had not even known existed: she spoke of the horrors of the WWII sex camps where between 100,000 and 200,000 thousand women were taken by the Japanese army; she spoke of girls as young as eleven being taken from their classrooms and homes at gunpoint; she spoke of her own ordeal at the age of fifteen of having to service an average of twenty-five men a day. And finally, she spoke of the need to bear witness for the rest of the women—ninety to ninety-five percent of those taken—that did not survive the camps.

Her speech felt like an assault—towards the end of it, I felt I had been kicked in the stomach. And the one thought that kept going through my mind was: why hadn’t I heard about this before? Why isn’t this covered in our history books—why isn’t this part of the world’s consciousness? So I turned to my friend and told her: “You should write about this—this is an important story, one that cannot be kept in silence!” Well, she immediately threw that challenge back at me, “You write about it,” she said. “You’re Korean!”

And, though initially I felt overwhelmed by the story—it was too big, I thought, both emotionally and in scope, for me to write about—eventually I had no choice; it haunted me until I realized the only way I could exorcize it from my dreams was to write it down. I quickly wrote a short story, called “Mother Tongue,” which later became the second chapter of Comfort Woman.
Silence was also the seed of *Fox Girl*. But the silence that surrounded the history of the prostitutes living outside the American military bases in Korea was very different from the silence that enveloped comfort women for almost fifty years. Whereas not many people in the general public had heard about the plight of Comfort Women in the early 1990s, most people I talked with—both in America and Korea—knew about the GI girls living in Korea's America Towns. “Why do you want to write about them?” I heard over and over again. “It's not a very polite thing to talk about. It'll give people the wrong impression about Koreans, about your family. About you.”

Of course, that only made me want to write even more.
The question usually came near the end of the Q&A during my book tour, and it always came from another Asian American. “How do you feel,” the person would ask, “about being marketed as an Asian American author?” A loaded question, of course—seemingly sympathetic, yet vaguely accusatory. What the person really meant was, “Aren’t you pissed about it, because I am, and if you’re not, or, God forbid, if you were a party to it, then I’m going to be pissed at you.”

But I have to admit that I was a party to it. I had, after all, named my short story collection Yellow, and two out of the eight stories are unadulterated polemics, blatantly confronting the issue of racism. But the others? Although the characters are all Asian Americans, the stories are pretty standard manifestations of au courant literary pretension, thematically revolving around those old standbys, love and loneliness, alienation and abandonment, around what nihilistic, M.F.A.-schooled, liberal, East Coast Establishment writers like myself view as the sad, ineffable maw that is sometimes the human heart. To me, despite being a third-generation Korean American, or what Hawai’ians call a yobo, the title Yellow had more to do with the characters’ emotional fears than with their ethnicity. While writing the book, I hadn’t thought all that much about its political or racial implications. I had been, first and foremost, just trying to write decent short stories. Soon after I sold the collection, things began to change.

I remember my first meeting with my editor at W.W. Norton, Alane Mason. We got around to discussing the publication date for the book, and Alane suggested the fall. I pressed for spring. I didn’t want to wait any longer than I had to for its release. I thought some marketing savvy would sway her, so I reminded Alane that May was Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. “Well,” she said to me sweetly, “we’re not planning to push your collection as an Asian American book. We’re simply going to market it as the debut of a great new literary voice.” I believed she was being sincere in saying that, but I also believed she was being enormously naïve. I knew that whatever we did, no matter how the book was packaged or designed, regardless of what the flap copy proclaimed or the press release said, this title or another title, the book would be received and qualified as an Asian American book, not on its own merits or lack thereof.

Was I being pessimistic and paranoid? Yes. Was I proven correct? Yes. I’ve worked as an editor for a long time, and I’m well aware that the market for books of literary fiction—especially short story collections—is awful. Even with the best of intentions, publishers have a hard time figuring out how to sell them, and the media has an even more difficult time figuring out how to review them. How many different ways can you describe the sad, ineffable maw that is sometimes the human heart? Reporters and interviewers need some sort of a hook, a human-interest an-
gle, with which to approach an author and work, and the race card is often the easiest, sexiest one available.

I got an inkling of what was to come early on. Right away there were several group reviews, my collection lumped together with two others by Asian Americans that came out at the same time, despite the fact that the books didn’t have much in common: *Talking in the Dark* by Laura Glen Louis and *Troublemaker and Other Saints* by Christina Chiu. And predictably, in the initial interviews, there were questions about the Asian diaspora, about Asian American literature, trends, histories, demographics, divisions. I’d hem and haw, I’d deflect and defer, but the questions kept returning, and I kept being asked to make generalizations about Asian Americans, as if I were a sociologist and my book were a treatise, as if I could speak not only for Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Americans, but for Vietnamese, Pakistani, Indian, Hmong, and Filipino Americans as well.

So this is what I began to say in interviews: “Most of the Asian American literature I’ve encountered has dealt with F.O.B.’s—immigrants Fresh Off the Boat. I wanted to write about people like me, third- and fourth-generation, post-immigrant Asian Americans who are very much assimilated into the overall culture, but who have residual ethnic ties.” I would hear a pleased “hmm” on the other end of the phone, followed by the eager clicking of computer keys. “I don’t go around every minute of the day thinking I’m Asian, and neither do the characters in the book. I wanted to show that Asian Americans can be just as individual and different, as sexual, artsy, feisty, athletic, articulate, neurotic, and screwed up as anyone else in America.” A laugh, then furious clicking. “At the same time, I want to educate people about the subtle and not so subtle kinds of prejudice that Asian Americans face every day. With literary fiction, I’d always believed I was preaching to the converted.” Another laugh.

“But I found out I was wrong one day talking to a left wing white academic, who told me he had never really thought Asians were discriminated against, being the model minority.” Click-click-click. “I suppose one could say that most of the discrimination comes in the form of benevolent stereotypes: All Asians are smart and hard-working. All Asian men are geeky engineers. All Asian women are either submissive chrysanthemums or seductive hotties. These might not seem like hugely destructive stereotypes, but ultimately I don’t believe that any stereotype can be benevolent or helpful.”

Every time I heard clicking, I stored the statement away, prepared to pull it out and use it again. In short, I developed sound bites for myself. I said the same things over and over during thirty interviews for newspapers, magazines, TV and radio shows, panels, and online chats. And I got good at it. I gave good copy. I was articulate, self-deprecating, insightful, passionate, funny, above all accommodating—a reporter’s dream. And instead of letting on that I was annoyed or hurt or angered by the questions, I pretended to be grateful. Grateful for the attention. I didn’t complain. I didn’t challenge anyone. I didn’t say that some of the questions and comments were presumptuous, stupid, and inherently racist.

I felt like an Uncle Tong, a poster boy Twinkie—yellow on the outside, white on the inside. Ironically, the more I denied the ethnic component of my short stories, the more I was asked to talk about my position, explain what it was like to be an Asian writer in America today. To some people, it appeared I was exploiting my ethnicity in order to peddle a few more copies of my book. I was also aware that I was providing fodder for the simmering, growing backlash against multiculturalism that is out there, this unspoken assumption that anything bestowed to minority writers—awards, publicity, sales, grants, academic appointments, heck, the fact that they got published at all—is suspect, in all likelihood
the largess of political correctness, merely the benefit of literary affirmative action. No doubt, multiculturalism has led to some bad books being published, and I was left to question if my book was bad. Maybe my book was only interesting as a multiculty artifact. Maybe it wasn't worth discussing in any other way.

In the end, I couldn't stop my book from being ghettoized as ethnic lit, I couldn't stop those cute little references in reviews to geishas and fortune cookies and _kimchee_. In the end, I managed to piss off pretty much everyone—either for being too Asian, or not Asian enough. In the end, I began to wonder if the only reason my book got published at all was because I was Asian, or, conversely, if I could have sold more copies, gotten more notice, were it not for the Asian label. In the end, I decided, I probably got exactly what I deserved.
I’d like to begin with three instances of silence and invisibility. My first example is from Kim Ronyoung’s 1986 novel, *Clay Walls*, which describes a Korean American family from the 1920s through the end of World War II. When, at the height of the Depression, one of the sons is summoned to juvenile court for receiving stolen goods, the mother plans to bring the entire family in good clothes, to plead for her son by explaining the cohesiveness of Korean families in a prototypical “model minority” defense:

I’m going to tell the judge that it wasn’t John’s fault. He did it for me, for his family. I’m going to tell the judge that if he sends John to jail, he will bring disgrace upon our family. I’m going to tell him that for Koreans, the family comes first.

Meanwhile, the adolescent daughter imagines her mother making this speech to a courtroom full of confused Caucasians asking each other, “What’s a Korean?” (206) At a time when Korea was a Japanese colony whose sovereignty was not recognized by the US and other Western nations, Koreans in America found that many Americans had not even heard of their country.

My second example comes from the classroom. Recently, when I taught Maxine Hong Kingston’s memoir in my course on Contemporary American literature, I gave the class a summary of the history of Chinese exclusion. I explained that Chinese laborers could not legally enter the US as permanent residents from 1880 through 1943, that Chinese could not become naturalized citizens during that period, and that for six decades there were laws, both against bringing Chinese women and against Chinese men marrying white American women. I wanted my students to know that, in Kingston’s memoir, the Chinese emigrants’ mistrust of the American government was rooted, not in Chinese character so much as in these anti-Chinese government policies, and that the community’s misogyny was also exacerbated by several generations of US policies forcing Chinese men in the US to live as bachelors. The exclusion law, though framed with Chinese in mind, affected Japanese and Koreans as well. After this short introduction, I asked my students to raise their hands if they had ever heard of the Chinese exclusion laws before. Out of forty English majors, four raised hands.

Third, I recall the last question from the audience at the reading last night. A young woman stood up and explained that, as a Korean adoptee of white parents, she did not feel knowledgeable about Korean culture, did not see her experience validated or acknowledged in published literature, and found it difficult to write about her own experience. In a voice taut with emotion, she asked, “How can I write for social justice?”

As an East Coast scholar of Asian American literature, I feel this is a rare and special occasion for an exchange among Korean American cultur-
al producers who do an intriguing range of work. Heinz Insu Fenkl, Nora Okja Keller, and Don Lee create Asian American literature; Don and Heinz edit and publish it; Heinz is a scholar of Korean literature and folklore; many of you are scholars, critics, and teachers of Korean humanities; and all of us are readers. In particular, I’m honored to be here with Elaine Kim, one of the founding mothers of Asian American literary studies whose scholarship has provided roots for others, and whose work continues to define values and priorities in our branch of literary and cultural studies. Collectively, we represent a community with varying investments in Korean American literature. To this community I pose some basic questions about the guiding principles for assessing the past and steering the future. In Korean American literature, what is good? What is worthwhile? How do we best use the time and space allotted to us?

Elaine Kim’s overview gives us, first, an encouraging picture of the forest of Korean American literature published in English. Beginning with Younghill Kang’s lonely two texts in the 1930s, there is nothing until Richard Kim’s books, two military thrillers in the 60s and his memoir in 1970. Then there is a silence of 15 years, during which Asian American Studies takes root; Theresa Cha writes *Dictee* without attracting much attention, and Elaine Kim’s pioneering study on Asian American literature is published. Then, in 1987, Ronyoung Kim’s deliberately accessible, historically informative two-generation bildungsroman *Clay Walls* appears; and by then there is an academic community equipped to read and teach Kim’s and Cha’s works. Four literary authors in eighty-seven years is not an impressive number for an ethnic group; or, to be precise, it is a number that speaks loudly of erasure and invisibility. It is not a good sign that, to our knowledge, no women were published until 1982; nor is it a good sign that both Kang and Kim ceased to publish books after writing their autobiographical narratives. And so, even as the grove of Asian American literature begins to flourish and thicken in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the echoes of that silence reverberate in the choices writers and academics make.

Indeed, Korean American writers are still constrained by the limited allotment of discursive space granted to them, as a subset of the minority, “Asian American writers,” at the bookstore, in book reviews, and in the classroom. If I choose to sneak a Korean American author into my course on contemporary American literature, my choice may be affected by the knowledge that this may be the only Korean American author some of these students will ever read. Texts like *Comfort Woman* or *Memories of My Ghost Brother* are indeed haunting literary performances about underrepresented subjects and sites, but do I want the sole representations of Korean America in the course to be about comfort women and the military camptowns? Or to switch tacks, as an Asian American scholar, can I get my paper on Gish Jen’s and Don Lee’s wise, edgy portrayals of middle-aged urban professionals published as easily as my paper about Michael Ondaatje’s novel about human rights violations in Sri Lanka? Which topic is more needed? Which books are more deserving of my colleagues’ and students notice? How do we make such choices?

Elaine Kim has always been a standard bearer for Asian American literature, and her talk today is characteristic of Asian American studies in her attention to the rhetorical, some would say ideological, tasks undertaken by the various literary texts. I heard three familiar themes, three themes that remain central to Asian American studies. For over thirty years now, critics and writers have danced around these objectives: to bear witness to Asian American histories; to give voice, face, and body to Asian American subjectivities; and to challenge the mainstream narratives of American benevolence, progress and inclusiveness. In the case of Korean American literature, this means
literary writers have had the burden and the opportunity of writing for an ignorant public about Korean experiences of Japanese colonization, the Korean War, the postwar division of Korea, and Korean immigrant experiences in Hawai‘i and the mainland. Korean writers, filmmakers, and scholars have jumped into the breach of misrepresentation following the 1992 race riots of Los Angeles and addressed such contemporary topics as the uneven interpellations of gendered subjects in US and Korean cultures, and shifting gender roles; lesbian identity; and labor leadership in Hawai‘i. We’ve heard, too, about the lack of fit between the Korean witness and the American public, the near silencing impossibility of witnessing to Korean experience in a limited discursive space to a people so unaware of the Korean historical realities. Elaine Kim captures this in her example, from Susan Choi’s novel The Foreign Student, of the Korean speaker welcomed to the American South with the question, “How did you like that war we had for you?”

Consider the task of witnessing to Korean and Korean American history. The individual writer may well wish to avoid this huge task, but how can Korean American experience be intelligible without knowledge, not only of racism and discrimination in the US, but of the broad strokes of Korean national history? Yet, who is qualified to speak of that history? Given the scope of the silence to be challenged, how can the writer turn to other tasks—such as the creation of suppressed private stories—while still paying heed to the grand tragic narrative of 20th century history? And, important as that history may be, shouldn’t Korean American writers be free to turn to the American, the domestic, the everyday, without always living in the shadow of that specter across the sea? Isn’t that what makes them Korean American?

In terms of domestic representation, Asian American critics almost reflexively check literary texts’ position in a familiar ideological spectrum. We know, for instance, when Elaine Kim writes:

Instead of taking the reader on a teleological immigrant’s journey from penniless foreigner to successful citizen, [Younghill] Kang’s book calls into question American narratives of progress, equality, assimilation, and upward mobility, (3)

or

By troubling the notion of progress from fragmentation to wholeness or from immigrant to citizen, [Theresa] Cha challenges the United States nationalist narrative. And by bringing Korea and Koreans into view after the damage done by Japanese colonization has been glossed over by history, she creates a space for justice as well as for difference, (9)

or

[Patty] Kim’s novel offers no resolution, no reconciliation, no happy transformation of the immigrant alien into triumphant American citizen, (14)

that, in Asian American criticism, these are terms of highest praise. Conversely, when she notes, “Korean American writing has been most marketable when it represents an exotic and implicitly inferior culture,” the term “marketable” carries a hint of stigma. Surely it would be a caricature to suggest that Asian American criticism univocally condemns novels that seem to celebrate assimilation, or achieve commercial success, yet the consistent assertion of these values in the critical tradition I share with Elaine must give us pause. Professors and writers, how is it possible to write truthfully without acknowledging the successful assimilation of some into the middle class? On the other hand, how is it possible to write seriously about the full range of Korean suffering, oppression, and eccentricity without perpetuating some readers’ perceptions that Korean Americans are “exotic and slightly inferior”?
In considering this question, it may be useful to consider Professor Viet Thanh Nguyen’s arguments about Asian American scholarship’s constructions of authors as “good subjects”—“model minority” types who adhere to the dominant ideology of their society without being aware of their adherence—vs. “bad subjects,” those who “reject dominant ideology (although that does not mean they are free from ideology itself) and occasionally provoke the (repressive) state apparatus.” As Nguyen explains in this study, Race and Resistance, the sign of the bad subject guides Asian American intellectuals’ “excavation of the past and interpolation of the present.” (144) In critical practice, this means that critics tend to celebrate “bad subjects,” those resistant to dominant ideology, as “good” Asian American authors. Conversely, “good subjects,” the model minority types like Jade Snow Wong, are treated as “bad” Asian Americans who have taken the quick, dirty road to popularity and critical perdition—they celebrate America. A corollary of Nguyen’s thesis is that when a critic argues, as I recently saw a young scholar do of Clay Walls, that a happy ending—usually signaled by the interpellation of the Asian American protagonist into the middle class—is not really happy, that is, not really proassimilationist, we know that a critical recovery is under way.

Nguyen proposes that we as readers reconsider the good subject/bad subject paradigm and view Asian Americans as “ethnic entrepreneurs” who must devise flexible strategies, for their particular period and place, to deliver their particular cultural capital—their ethnic story—to the literary marketplace. Overturning the usual connotations of “selling out” or providing ethnic culture and experience as a kind of pornographic spectacle, Nguyen reframes the creative process as one dependent on the market for survival, and asks that we consider authors’ choices in less polarized, more descriptive and pragmatic terms.3

The task of giving voice, face, and body to Korean American subjects heretofore silenced, erased, or misrepresented is arguably the central task of Korean American literature. Elaine Kim has described some of the voices recovered, biographically and imaginatively, from silence: those of colonial and wartime survivors, prostitutes, orphans, adoptees, and Korean Americans misconstrued by the American press in the period of the LA riots, lesbians, and other Korean Americans strangely occluded by both US and Korean national narratives. Again, this task, already daunting after so long and deep a silence, is also complicated by the problem of asking the few to represent the many. An atmosphere of scarcity makes it seem more urgent and more difficult to determine which stories are most worthy to be told and heard.

Between the need to witness or refer responsibly to the Korean and Korean American pasts, to trouble triumphalist narratives, to speak for the silenced, and to be marketable, yet not exotic or inferior, it may seem that we critics, we readers, already place undue burdens on our creative colleagues. Scholars and students of Korean culture may have additional expectations, different from those of either Asian American or mainstream American readers, which I invite you to discuss. Honored writers, I ask for even more. As a group, you’ve shown you can depict the tragic, the heartrending, the acerbic, the bitter. Can you also let us laugh? And can you fly?

Laughing is important, I believe, in the basic sites of hoped-for conversion: the bookstore, the library, the beach, the airport, and the classroom. As a card-carrying academic, I admit to no leisure time, no insider knowledge of beaches or airports, but I can speak of my time in the Asian American literature classroom. A few years ago, as I led my “Introduction to Asian American Literature” class through an array of carefully selected, ethnically, historically, generationally, sexually balanced literary readings about the great issues of Asian America, I found I was logging an ex-
traordinarily high body count. Week after week, debilitated Asian American characters in subtle, complex, politically challenging texts committed suicide. Respected authors Amy Tan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Faye Myenne Ng, John Okada, Velina Hasu Houston, and Nora Okja Keller structured significant episodes or whole texts around the suicides of crazed or fallen women. In an iconoclastic gesture, David Henry Hwang deconstructed Orientalism in order to have a white man dressed as an Asian woman commit suicide. And Heinz Insu Fenkl, with particular courage and compassion, wrote about two suicides in his own family. Privately, I had to question what message I and the best and brightest of Asian American literature were really teaching my students about Asians, especially Asian women.

The following semester, I deliberately chose Lydia Minatoya’s oddly buoyant novel about wartime Japan, *The Strangeness of Beauty*, and *Asian American Drama: Nine Plays from the Multicultural Landscape*, edited by Brian Nelson, the former dramaturge of East-West players. Nelson had deliberately chosen some plays that were not about the internment, intergenerational conflict, and the other grave mainstays of Asian American literature. We read Garrett Omana’s effervescent comedy about interracial dating and the racialization of literary fantasy, *S.A.M. I Am*, and David Henry Hwang’s play about interracial love and stereotyping in a bondage parlor, *Bondage*; we laughed, and we rested in the recognition that noninferior, nonexotic, yet clearly racialized Asian Americans could also have dating angst. Was this a wasted opportunity or a crucial step in reclaiming Asian Americans from alterity? When David Henry Hwang, in his revision of Rogers and Hammerstein’s outdated musical comedy, blends traditional wisecracks and production numbers with a plot about “authenticity” and commercial success in Chinese American theater in *Flower Drum Song*, is that a regressive moment? A subversive moment? Or a flexible strategy? Is it a sin, or conversely, how is it worthwhile, for an artist to spend a text saying, we’re just like everyone else, if he says it with flashy choreography?

The recognition that Asian Americans don’t think about race all the time is implied by several of the contemporary writers quoted by Elaine. Don Lee’s book, *Yellow*, is a fresh and penetrating example of a type of writing now just finding its way—writing that portrays Asian Americans as ordinary characters who, while not deracinated, are free to wear their race, ethnicity, and history more lightly than their predecessors. Lee’s characters, like those of such Chinese American writers as Gish Jen, David Wong Louie, and Shawn Wong, have a contemporary feel yet explore and expand what it means to be Korean American.

Finally, I appreciate and second Elaine’s call for wings. With so much duty to social realities, the questions of craft, art, and imagination may be given short shrift by academics. Perhaps because of the critical temper of our time, Asian American scholars often fail to capture and appreciate the formal, technical, and aesthetic choices authors have made along the way. In our love of the long prose works that disrupt and reconfigure history, we often overlook poetry and drama. Documenting suffering is needed, yes. But what about joy and aesthetic pleasure? What about freedom of imagination? Can we allow these into the canon of works we write about, teach, and recommend to the neighbors’ book clubs? Can we afford to frame a literature without them? All too often, we critics ignore these crucial dimensions of the texts we attend to—the very things that first drew us into literature, that draw us on through those long pages of anger and suffering. Like wine critics who claim to prefer dry wines but drink up the fruity ones, we push our writers to the political cutting edge, yet secretly long for surprise and delight. Our best writers know this. Why else do Don Lee, Nora Okja Keller, and Heinz Insu Fenkl end books with images of weddings, dancing, and dreams of rebirth and flight?
Heinz Insu Fenkl has painted an encouraging picture of Korean American literature as a lively, growing field that, while still engaging with the issues we’ve debated today, also has room for writing that turns away or takes up new concerns, new techniques, and genres. With this explosion of literary creativity in mind, I would like to end with Heinz Fenkl’s reply to the young woman who aspired to write about social justice. He said that when you set out to write about an abstract ideal like social justice, you don’t get the best writing; you get a social tract. The way to make a difference is to write truly and vividly about a specific experience, maybe your own. “And remember,” he said, “What you say does matter. It will make a difference.”

Works Cited


**Endnotes**


As both Nora Okja Keller and Don Lee so compellingly demonstrated today through their respective stories, it seems to be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to embody the “right” kind of Korean American-ness and to create the proper type of Korean American literature. They appear to share similar anxiety and frustration that other minority writers have coped and wrangled with; trapped between the danger of “being vulgar” and cashing in on one’s differences and the accusation of “selling out” and stifling one’s own, supposedly genuine, ethnicity, these writers feel as though they are not being allowed to do or become anything other than actively becoming and remaining Korean American, according to the mold that the mainstream society offers to them. The danger of perpetually oscillating between trying not to be too different and not appearing to be too similar (and, one might add, not “knowing your place” seems always to lurk around the corner. As Don Lee suggests, maybe Korean American writers should just tell the mainstream readers, publishers, and critics what they want to hear and gratefully accept their dole because, no matter what they attempt to do, that is what these audiences will hear anyway. In a similar vein, perhaps Korean American literature is what mainstream readers and publishers want it to be: different enough to be fun, with its exotic and amusing details, but similar enough to keep them comfortable. Or is Korean American literature about the struggle one wages through one’s literary work against the imposed mixture of alienness and sameness by actively intervening in the formation of cultural expectations and exchange and by historicizing and assuming the writer’s responsibilities to society at large? Here I am suggesting that we take up on the challenge that Elaine Kim issued to the next generation of Korean American writers: establish as our goal the construction of “a space for justice as well as for difference.” Wouldn’t that offer us an exit strategy out of this seemingly endless cycle of sameness and difference? Or, even more importantly, isn’t that the only hope in this globalized cultural system where, as Samir Amin points out, the claim of difference remains empowering only when it comes with “the right to be similar” when one desire to be? In order for one to be able to decide when you want to exert the right to be similar, a world in which justice prevails and the minority writers have the mobility to claim different cultural sites and positionalities has to be constructed.

Therefore, the issue is, again, mobility. Just as the binary of the public and private spheres creates an illusory division of prestige, resources, space, and power (e.g., the assertion that men own the public sphere, and women the private, when in reality men have been always the masters of the private sphere as well as the owners of the public sphere), the binary between the
mainstream culture and minority culture is not about dividing their spheres but about the lack of mobility accorded to the minority writers. As we can tell from the history of the publication and reception of Maxing Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, which had to be marketed as a non-fiction autobiography rather than a full-fledged novel, the center also defines the margin, even when the margin rebels and defies the center. We have to remember hegemony is always about mobility, and the center always claims the margin as its own.

In some ways, this is a story shared by many different Asian Americans in general. Lisa Lowe reminds us of the central contradiction in American society between the two reigning social ideologies – democratic ideals of the political discourse and the economic principles of the maximization of profit and exploitation. How does one propound egalitarian ideals in political discourse while organizing one’s economic structure based on the sacred economic principles of effectiveness and maximum profit? According to Lowe, in modern American history, the solution has been invariably offered in racism. The presence of devalued labor provided by dehumanized minority populations, such as slaves, and later African American, Irish American, Asian American workers, and Hispanic American workers (often made invisible by those in power) make it possible for American society to believe that it is living up to the promise of liberty and freedom while ruthlessly pursuing economic development and dominance domestically and overseas, riding on the back of those “other” workers. After all, those workers are not full citizens of the countries in which they work (ensured a series of discriminatory anti-immigration, anti-naturalization legislation) and therefore not entitled to the same basic rights as “normal” US subjects.

There seems to be a unique cultural mythos, however, around the relationship between the United States and Korea, which inevitably defines and shapes Korean American writers’ cultural mobility. On February 8, 2003, CBS aired a segment of “60 Minutes” that covered “Anti-American sentiments” in South Korea. Recall the demonstrations in South Korea following the acquittal of the US soldiers who operated a military “vehicle” — more like a behemoth of a war machine — which crushed two middle school girls to death. In this coverage, a high level US general stationed in South Korea, with his eyes welling up and lips trembling, told interviewer Tom Simon how his feelings are hurt when his men are called bad names on the street by ungrateful Koreans. Not to be outperformed, Tom Simon interjected, with his voice cracking with emotion, “so now they are saying that they don’t need their father any more.” Thus the outraged and wronged father, whose goal was ever to serve the children and whose unconditional love is now being spurned, is how the United States views itself in relation to South Korea. In this discourse, all the ingredients of colonial/neocolonial discourses are eminently displayed: nation, family, intimacy, betrayal, looming punishment, etc.

I cannot think of any other country to which the United States would so unhesitatingly declare itself Father. Even in the case of the Philippines, which was a formal colony of the US, the relationship between the two countries was imagined and articulated as that of tutelage rather than that of direct paternity. Due to the supposed moral uprightness of the US intervention in contrast to the much more contentious and maligned US intervention in Vietnam, for example, South Korea stands in for the glory moments of the US at its best as a superpower. Consequently, the US expects and demands a special kind of gratitude and obedience from South Korea and its subjects more than from any other nations under its influence.

This “special” relationship between the US and South Korea is also necessarily a hypersexualized one, thanks to the militarized and mascu-
linized US presence in South Korea, supported by the usual R&R facilities around its bases and the booming industry of sex tourism. As Evelyn Nagano Glen pointed out in *Issei, Nissei, and War Brides*, the domestic labor that Asian American men and women performed in the US privatized, domesticated, and feminized the whole ethnicity. I would argue that, in the same manner, Korea and Korean Americans are also sexualized through the US's memory of, and interaction with, Korea through comfort women, base women, and women available to them through sex tourism. Nora Okja Keller's novels, *Comfort Women* and *Fox Girl*, draw our attention to the continued sexualization of Korea in its relationship with the US. In an interview, Keller said, “*Fox Girl* was the natural follow-up: What happened to these women after they served as comfort women? I feel the women in *Fox Girl* are the descendants of the comfort women.” Accordingly, the most urgent issue for Keller is not just to lament the atrocities committed against the comfort women during World War II but to inscribe the continued subjection and sexualization of Korea and its women and their pursuit of autonomy, as we see in Akiko’s and Becca’s juxtaposed narratives in *Comfort Women*.

It is intriguing to speculate, risking crude generalization or even the essentialization of our two authors' novels, whether the gender of each author has anything to do with her and his choice of the subject matter and the ethos of their work. Nora Okja Keller's novels are firmly rooted in the most quintessentially “Korean” and gendered themes and historical moments: the sexual violation of Korean women by the colonial/imperial foreign powers. By comparison, Don Lee's writing is concerned with the “human matters” of desire, angst, and love of cosmopolitan, postmodern subjects. Is it possible that Don Lee, as a male minority writer, more vigorously pursues the promised land of sheer artistry and literary imagination where an author does not have to be defined or limited by nationality or ethnicity because, after all, he believes that this promised land is, or should be, attainable by him?

Don Lee's novels ask a set of questions related but distinct from Keller’s work in terms of what it means to be a Korean American writer. What happens to Korean American males and their manhood, given the context of feminization of Asian males in general and the subjugation of Korean American males in particular? According to Don Lee's textual world, there are at least two responses: characters can either reassert their masculinity by proving that they can be as sexually dominant (even fantastically dominant and outperform the white American masculinity, as Elaine Kim has pointed out), or they can achieve the state of irreverent transgression by mocking and mimicking the myth of fantastical maleness. But maybe there is another option available to Korean Americans. What if authors were to acquire the wisdom about the intertwined nature of the gender exploitation and race oppression and construct a literary world in which they pursue the possibility of Korean American men and women being both freed from raced and gendered system of discrimination and violence? We are left to dream about the possibility because, paradoxically enough, it is in Don Lee's *Yellow*, in which the characters are indeed pursuing and entangled in the timeless and seemingly unraced and ungendered matter of “the sad, ineffable maw that is sometimes the human heart” rather than anything directed related to their ethnicity, that we become more acutely aware of the lack of mobility suffered by the characters and the author himself due to their ethnic identity being imposed upon them. Would it be possible for us to imagine that both the author and the characters will attain genuine freedom and cultural mobility only when they recognize the necessarily historical and even political nature of the human heart itself?
Profiles

Speakers

Heinz Insu Fenkl

Heinz Insu Fenkl is an author, editor, translator, folklorist, and the director of the Creative Writing Program and of The Interstitial Studies Institute at the State University of New York, New Paltz. He studied in Vassar, University of California, Davis, and in Seoul. He was named a Barnes and Noble “Great New Writer” and Pen/Hemingway finalist in 1997 for Memories of My Ghost Brother, an autobiographical novel about growing up in Korea as a biracial child in the ‘60s. His other publications include Shadows Bend (a collaborative work, published under a pseudonym), an innovative, dark ‘road novel’ about H.P. Lovecraft, Robert E. Howard, and Clark Ashton Smith, and short fiction in a variety of journals and magazines and articles on folklore and myth. He also writes regular columns on mythic topics for Realms of Fantasy magazine. Currently he is at work on a sequel to Memories of My Ghost Brother, and on a volume of Korean myths, legends, and folk tales.

Nora Okja Keller

Nora Okja Keller was born in Seoul, Korea, and now lives in Hawai’i with her husband and two daughters. In 1995, she received the Pushcart Prize for “Mother Tongue,” which later became a chapter in Comfort Woman, her first novel and winner of the 1998 American Book Award. Her second novel, Fox Girl, was published in 2002. She is also co-editor of Intersecting Circles: Voices of Hapa Women (1999) and YOBO: Korean American Writers in Hawaii (2003). Her column “Small Moments” appears Sundays in The Honolulu Star Bulletin.

Elaine H. Kim

Elaine H. Kim is Associate Dean of the Graduate Division and Professor of Asian American Studies Program at the University of California, Berkeley. Her latest book is Fresh Talk/Daring Gazes: Conversations on Asian American Art (UC press 2003). She has written and co-edited nine other books and numerous articles in Asian American literary and cultural studies and worked as executive producer, co-producer, and associate producer on a number of films, including the documentary Labor Women (2003) about Asian American women labor organizers. She is the recipient of Rockefeller and Fulbright grants and was appointed by President Clinton to the White House Commission on Women in History. She was elected President of the National Association of Asian American Studies and is a co-founder of several community-based non-profit service organizations, such as Asian Immigrant Women Advocates, Asian Women United of California, and the Korean Community Center.
in Oakland.

**Don Lee**

Don Lee, a third-generation Korean American, is the author of the short story collection *Yellow*, which won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction. The son of a career State Department officer, he spent the majority of his childhood in Tokyo and Seoul. His stories have appeared in *GQ, New England Review, Manoa, Bamboo Ridge, and American Short Fiction*, and he has received fellowships from the Massachusetts Cultural Council and the St. Botolph Club Foundation. He lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and is the editor of the literary journal *Ploughshares*. His first novel, *Country of Origin*, was published by W.W. Norton in July, 2004.

**COMMENTATORS**

**Patricia Pei-chang Chu**


**You-me Park**

You-me Park is a visiting assistant professor of the Women's Studies Program at Georgetown University. Her work has appeared in many anthologies and journals including *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, Positions: East Asia Culture Critique, and Studies of American Literature*. She is currently completing a manuscript on gender and peace studies.
**Conveners**

**Roy Richard Grinker**
Roy Richard Grinker is professor of anthropology and international affairs at the George Washington University. He received his B.A. from Grinnell College in 1983, and his Master's and Ph.D. degrees in Social Anthropology from Harvard University in 1985 and 1989, respectively. Between 1985 and 1988 he conducted 22 months of fieldwork with the Efe (Pygmies) and Lese farmers of the Ituri Forest, Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire). Publications based on that research include *Houses in the Rainforest: Ethnicity and Inequality among Farmers and Foragers in Northeastern Zaire*. He is also the editor of *Perspectives on Africa: A Reader in Culture, History, and Representation* (co-edited and introduced with Christopher B. Steiner), and *In the Arms of Africa: The Life of Colin M. Turnbull*. A specialist in Korean studies as well, he has conducted fieldwork in South Korea since 1992 and is the author of *Korea and its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War*.

**Young-Key Kim-Renaud**
Young-Key Kim-Renaud is Professor of Korean Language and Culture and International Affairs and Chair of the Department of East Asian Languages and Literatures at The George Washington University. She received her Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii. She is a theoretical linguist with a broad interest in the humanities and Asian affairs. Her numerous publications include *Creative Women of Korea: From the Fifteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*, *The Korean Alphabet: Its History and Structure*, *Theoretical Issues in Korean Linguistics*, *King Sejong the Great: The Light of 15th-Century Korea*, *Studies in Korean Linguistics*, and *Korean Consonantal Phonology*.

**Kirk W. Larsen**
Kirk W. Larsen is the Korea Foundation Assistant Professor of History and International Affairs at the George Washington University. Dr. Larsen received his Ph.D. in history from Harvard University. He teaches courses in Korean history and culture, modern Korean history, and the history of international systems. Prof. Larsen is finishing a study of Qing Imperialism in Korea (tentatively titled: *From Suzerainty to Imperialism: The Qing Empire and Chos? Korea, 1876-1910*). He is also working on projects on 19th-century Korea’s foreign trade and integration into the world economy; cannibalism and other “urban legends;” and the history of North and South Korea in the 1980’s.