

PERFORMING THE KOREAN DIASPORA:
CONTEMPORARY THEATER AND PERFORMANCE IN THE UNITED STATES

by

JIEUN LEE

(Under the Direction of Marla Carlson)

ABSTRACT

Inspired by the recent growth of interest in the United States for Asian American drama and dramatists, this dissertation investigates nine contemporary Korean American theater and performance works that depict the diasporic experience and identity—works that also express Korean cultures, history, and memory both in the United States and South Korea. Rooted in the interdisciplinary realm (Theater and Performance Studies, Women’s Studies, Critical Adoption Studies, Asian American Studies, and Korean Studies), this study reveals how the Korean diaspora is configured, diversified, and complicated within performance spaces, as performing bodies remap the actual experience, history, and imagination of immigration as well as transnational adoption. My argument is that the performances of the Korean diaspora constitute a site of liminal belonging that not only transgresses the ethnic and national demarcations, but also transforms the politics of identity in the twenty-first century. Delving into the experiences of Korean diasporic families, women, and adoptees embodied in theater and performance, this research thus contends that liminal belonging of the Korean diaspora intersects with, and incorporates, the social constructs of race, class, gender, sexuality, citizenship, and

kinship in such a way as to restructure and reimagine the meanings of society and community across the Pacific.

INDEX WORDS: Theater, Performance, Playwrights, Stand-up Comedy, Ritual-Performance, Site-Specific Performance, Photography, Autobiographical Theater, Asian American, Korean American, Korean Diaspora, Koreanness, Family, Women, Adoptee, Immigration, Transnational Adoption, Liminal Belonging, Utopic Performativity, Community, Birth Search, Reunion, Race, Gender, Class, Citizenship, Kinship, Lloyd Suh, Diana Son, Julia Cho, Margaret Cho, Dohee Lee, Miru Kim, Marissa Lichwick, Sun Mee Chomet, Eric Sharp.

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2018

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May 2018

DEDICATION

사랑하는 나의 가족에게

(To my beloved family)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost, words cannot express my thankfulness to my six-year-long advisor and lifetime mentor Dr. Marla Carlson for advising this dissertation and guiding me on my scholarly path. Moreover, without the feedback of my committee members, Dr. David Saltz, Dr. Farley Richmond, and Dr. Esther Kim Lee, this research would not have reached its final objective. This work is also the sum of numerous layers of learning from the following professors: Dr. Fran Teague, Dr. Emily Sahakian, Dr. Rielle Navitski, and Dr. John Patrick Bray in the Department of Theatre and Films Studies, and Dr. Hyangsoon Yi in the Department of Comparative Literature. It has been my privilege to be a part of the wonderfully erudite intellectual community at UGA.

Dr. Juanita Johnson-Bailey, Dr. Patricia Richards, Dr. Cecilia Herles, Dr. Chris Cuomo, and Dr. Pat Del Rey from the Institute for Women's Studies were a constant source of knowledge that steered my growth as a teacher-researcher in what became my interdisciplinary research field of Theatre and Performance Studies and Women's Studies. Dr. Claudia Orenstein, Dr. Dongshin Chang, and Dr. Mira Felner from Hunter College, CUNY, as well as Dr. Moon-gyu Kim, Dr. Ji-kwan Yoon, and Dr. Eun-ae Lee from Duksung Women's University in South Korea were my inspiration at the very beginnings of my academic research journey. A special thanks goes to Dr. Ilka Saal, the editor of *Theatre Annual*, and the external readers of the journal for honing my article "Performing Transnational Adoption: Korean American Women Adoptees' Autobiographical Solo Performances," a section of chapter 3 in this dissertation.

I would like to express my gratitude to the Korean diasporic artists who shared their time, artistic goals, and personal stories with me during interviews for this research: Sun Mee Chomet, Eric Sharp, Miru Kim, Dohee Lee, as well as Marissa Lichwick. Their works and our discussions about the performances of the Korean diaspora in the U.S. made me investigate deeper into the issues dear to Korean immigrants, adoptees, and artists. I also would like to thank the Korean American Scholarship Foundation, and UGA's Interdisciplinary and Innovative Research Grant, Willson Center Graduate Research Award, and Dissertation Completion Award for their funding of my research.

I am so grateful to Kim Park Nelson who sent me her priceless support and heartfelt kindness. I am also thankful for Jinhee Lee and Jisung Yoo, the best of best friends who have listened to my sadness, anger, happiness, and joy over the years. It was my pleasure to have a delightful comrade in Asian American theater and performance through the Intersectional Theatre Alliance: Lukas Woodyard. Yves' insightful suggestions allowed me to clarify the dénouement of this research and Claudine Laperdris' enormous affection helped me to survive in my sometimes lonely life far from Korea. I deeply appreciate the biggest support and trust, and constructive criticism received from my father Soo-hyun Lee, mother Eun-young Choi, and sister Jiae Lee. On this familial note, I cannot forget to mention the four-legged Hercules. His irresistible cuteness (invasive fur notwithstanding) has given me immeasurable comfort during the process of writing this research. And lastly, to Alain, my counselor, soul mate, and Hearts Haven, without whom I would not have been able to finish, or even start, this dissertation. To all of you who have stood by me during this research and writing period, I wholeheartedly thank you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER	
1 FROM KOREAN AMERICAN HOME TO A SPACE OF LIMINAL BELONGING: THE CONFIGURATION OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN FAMILY DRAMAS	33
2 UTOPIC COMMUNITY THROUGH KOREAN AMERICAN WOMEN’S BODIES: THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN PERFORMANCE.....	80
3 KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEES WITNESSING RACE, GENDER, CLASS, CITIZENSHIP, AND KINSHIP: THE COMPLICATION OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL THEATER.....	150
CONCLUSION.....	209
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	218

INTRODUCTION

In an anthology covering works written by Asian Americans, *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*, Roberta Uno points out, “artistic production is [currently] being fueled by the vitality of burgeoning communities, particularly Korean and South and Southeast Asian, which are pushing the boundaries previously defined by an historical Chinese and Japanese immigrant presence.”¹ Echoing Uno’s statement, David Henry Hwang in *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays* recognizes Korean American dramatists’ potential—along with works by South Asian and Vietnamese dramatists—to be “among today’s most exciting.”² Drawing from the growth of interest in Korean American drama and dramatists, this dissertation investigates Korean American theater and performing artists whose works depict diasporic experiences and identities embodying Korean cultures, history, and memory both in the United States and in South Korea.³ For this study, I selected theater and performance

¹ Roberta Uno, “Introduction: Asian American Theater Awake at the Millennium,” in *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing*, eds. Rajini Srikanth and Esther Y. Iwanaga (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 324.

² David Henry Hwang, “Foreword,” in *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, ed. Chay Yew (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 2011), xii.

³ In this study, the preference is to not hyphenate compound adjectives of identity as it subsumes the first identity into the second, such as Korean-American. However, the standard grammatical regulation of hyphens in the use of compound adjectives will still

works by nine contemporary Korean American theater and performing artists whose works have been produced after the millennium: Lloyd Suh, Diana Son, Julia Cho, Margaret Cho, Dohee Lee, Miru Kim, Marissa Lichwick, Sun Mee Chomet, and Eric Sharp.

This dissertation aims to conceptualize how the Korean diaspora is configured, diversified, and complicated within performance spaces and with performing bodies remapping the actual experience, history, and imagination of immigration as well as transnational adoption. As the characteristics of diaspora are constantly in flux and its cultural identity changing, the goal of this research is to chart of the shifting landscape of Korean diasporic subjects in and beyond the United States and map their movement between languages, cultures, and worlds. Rooted in an interdisciplinary quest in Theater and Performance Studies, Women's Studies, Critical Adoption Studies, Asian American Studies, Asian Studies, and Korean Studies, this study utilizes analyses of actual performances, dramatic texts, personal stories, histories of immigration and transnational adoption from South Korea to the United States, and interviews with some of the artists.

I argue that the performances of the Korean diaspora constitute a site of liminal belonging. Liminality refers to a state of transition or betweenness, and belonging implies a stable state of identity with a group, society, and/or nation. Diaspora, however, complicates both liminality and belonging as it creates something like a state/sense of belonging but in flux. Victor Turner states that “liminal entities are neither here nor there;

be observed when identity is not the subject. I use “Korea” and “South Korea” mutually to refer to the Republic of Korea. When discussing the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, “North Korea” will be used.

they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial.”⁴ In this dissertation, “liminal belonging” refers to the generative notion of being in between what it means to be a Korean, what it means to be an American, and what it means to be a Korean diasporic artist; however, each chapter holds a particular aspect of how liminality is expressed. In the first chapter, liminal belonging is seen through the three playwrights’ uses of Korean cultural experiences and the element of space as analyzed in the setting/staging of their plays about trans-historical, inter-racial, and cross-cultural Korean American families. In the second chapter, which focuses on the three Korean American women performing artists, the female body itself holds a liminal quality, performing as a conduit to the artists’ audiences to reveal ethnic, sexual, spiritual, and spatial politics of belonging. In the last chapter, liminality in the transnational feature of the three Korean American adoptees’ experiences in the U.S. and during their birth searches for and reunions with their biological families in Korea, contests the flexible belonging that adoptees have often been summed up to have in terms of race, gender, class, citizenship, and kinship.

Analyzing the notion of liminal belonging, this dissertation contends that the embodiments of Korean diasporic identity and its cultural experiences incorporate and interact with various social constructions such as race, class, gender, and sexuality to restructure and reimagine the meanings of a society, community, history, and memory across the Pacific. The performances of the Korean diaspora are not just representations of a clearly delineated ethnic group descended from people of Korea, but constitute a

⁴ Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* 2nd ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2008), 95.

polymorphous contact zone with different forms of identity, diverse communities, and a wider society and ideology.⁵ Thus, this idea of liminal belonging not only conveys transnational mobility and trans-historical imagination of Korean diasporic experiences, but also discloses identities that intersect with different social constructions such as race and culture within and beyond U.S. boundaries. The performances considered here not only transgress the demarcations of ethnic and national belonging, but also transform the politics of social constructions of identity in the twenty-first century. In the following section, I will first explain the key term diaspora and present the history of the Korean diaspora in the United States. I will subsequently provide a brief review of literature on the performances of the Korean diaspora including discussions of Asian American theater. Lastly, I will draw an outline of the entire dissertation.

Diaspora in Discourse

Discussions about diaspora are varied and include diverse migratory situations and patterns; new transnational flows and mobility in which a new type of diaspora is configured and continues to transform itself; the consequences of movement complicating race, class, gender, and sexuality; and the meanings of belonging, community, identity, and social in/justice that diasporic individuals and/or communities encounter.⁶ With this variety of discourses on diaspora, Jana Evans Braziel and Anita

⁵ Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* 91 (1991): 33-40.

⁶ Floya Anthias lists six categories of diasporic experiences such as "dispersal and scattering; collective trauma; cultural flowering; troubled relationship with the majority; a sense of community transcending national frontiers; promoting a return movement."

Mannur point out the significance of theorizing about diaspora: “first, diaspora forces us to rethink the rubrics of nation and nationalism, while refiguring the relations of citizens and nation-states. Second, diaspora offers myriad, dislocated sites of contestation to the hegemonic, homogenizing forces of globalization.”⁷ In light of these two points and the importance of discussing diaspora in the current phenomenon of globalization, the term “diaspora” warrants a historical overview. The word “diaspora” etymologically traces back to the Greek term *diasperien* which means “across” (*dia-*) and “to sow or scatter seeds” (*sperien*).⁸ The word signifies a people’s displacement, dislocation, dispersion from their homeland. Historically, the term diaspora is associated with Jewish communities living outside of their homeland of Palestine as recorded in *Septuagint*, the Hebrew scripture circa third century BCE. However, the idea of diaspora has been widely used to refer to a group of people or descendants of people who left their homelands and have dispersed over the world such as the African diaspora in the French West Indies; overseas Asians from China, Japan, and India; and refugees from Syria, even those travelling for short or long term outside of their homelands. With regard to the close relation between the concept of diaspora and the Jewish context, Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin state that “this broadened deployment of the concept [of diaspora] offers

Floya Anthias, “Evaluating ‘Diaspora’: Beyond Ethnicity,” *Sociology* 32, no. 3 (1998): 557-81.

⁷ Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur, eds. *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 7.

⁸ Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora,” *Paragraph* 17, no.1 (1994): 207-12; Braziel and Mannur, *Theorizing Diaspora*, 1.

rich material for a reinvigoration of Jewish thought. Yet the converse is also true: analyses of non-Jewish diasporas will be most fruitful when they engage in dialogue with the specific Jewish context in which the term originated.”⁹ James Clifford develops a conceptualization of diaspora that applies to more than a strictly Jewish context, asserting that “the term ‘diaspora’ is a signifier not simply of transnationality and movement but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement.”¹⁰ In this dissertation, I employ the term “diaspora” in a widened sense to include both the transnational movement of a population and the emerging communities in the hostland, emphasizing Ien Ang’s concept of diasporas as “transnational, spatially and temporally sprawling sociocultural formations of people, creating imagined communities whose blurred and fluctuating boundaries are sustained by real and/or symbolic ties to some original ‘homeland.’”¹¹

Homi Bhabha interprets diaspora as an in-between space caused by transnational mobility from which a hybrid identity formation can emerge, characterized as innovative and anti-essentialist. In that in-between condition the mutual complexity of diasporic identity politics—and their construction and production—provides an opportunity to establish community and bring about culture. This liminal diasporic consciousness that

⁹ Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 7.

¹⁰ James Clifford, “Diaspora,” in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 252.

¹¹ Ien Ang, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West* (London: Routledge, 2001), 25.

has been marked as tension and juncture between “here” and “there” generates a critical question regarding identity, kinship, citizenship, and belonging in transnational flow and dis/connections. Anchoring these features of diaspora in this research is crucial in order to interrogate its interstitial identification, identity construction, and its production of the Korean diaspora imagined in theater and performance. Furthermore, this investigation aspires to show how the works of the selected Korean American artists open up “the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” and construct a “connective tissue” between polar opposites.¹²

According to Stuart Hall, cultural identity is “not an essence but a *positioning*. Hence, there is always a politics of identity, a politics of position.”¹³ Seen in this light, diasporic identities live in the process of *producing* newness and *positioning* themselves as differences, simultaneously seeking ways in which they can identify similarities with others. In this production of identity in between difference and similarity with others, diaspora formulates cultural identity by practicing a politics of positioning that negates essentialist formation of subjectivity based on “origin,” that is to say nationality and/or ethnicity. Diasporic identities necessarily entail heterogeneity and diversity.¹⁴ Thus, the performances that this dissertation analyzes unfold the Korean diaspora as an intersection, questioning and remapping diasporic landscapes as a continual and radical process of producing newness distinct in their incompleteness and demand for a multi-situatedness

¹² Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

¹³ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 226.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 226.

of cultural identities in and out of the U.S. In this sense, I use the term diaspora to encompass a provisional sense of belonging which is imperfect while the identifier Korean American resonates more as a retainer of citizenship.

Historical Views of the Korean Diaspora in the United States

At the time of this writing, the number of overseas Koreans living in the United States stands at nearly 2,500,000, ranking the United States a close second behind China's 2,542,620 Korean population.¹⁵ In the global diaspora standing, Korea ranks fourth after China, Israel, and Italy in terms of population numbers but first in regards to percentage of population.¹⁶ The historical trajectory of the Korean diaspora to the U.S. began in the early twentieth century. The first Koreans who came to the U.S. were indentured workers (including women and children) who moved to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations in 1902-3.¹⁷ The second group of Koreans that arrived in Hawaii by 1924 comprised approximately 1,000 Korean women known as "picture brides."¹⁸ Under

¹⁵ The U.S. number includes Koreans with various statuses: permanent resident, temporary worker and exchange visitor, international student, and citizen. "The Total Number of Overseas Koreans," *Korean Ministry of Foreign Affairs*, 2017.

¹⁶ Youna Kim, *Transnational Migration, Media and Identity of Asian Women: Diasporic Daughters* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 21.

¹⁷ See Wayne Patterson, *The Korean Frontier in America: Immigration to Hawaii, 1896-1910* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988).

¹⁸ "Picture bride" refers to the practice of choosing and "ordering" brides based on photographic information. In-Jin Yoon, "Onward Migration of Overseas Koreans and Pluralization of the Overseas Korean Community," in *The Korean Diaspora: A*

the Japanese colonial rule (1910-45), a number of Korean intellectuals came to the U.S. to form the Korean independence movement on American soil; some later became American citizens and/or leading politicians in Korea after its independence.¹⁹ After Korea's independence from Japanese imperial rule, the U.S. military governing power transformed Korean society into a modernized Western-style society establishing institutional systems in politics, economy, and education.²⁰

Subsequent to the devastation of the Korean War (1950-53), the South Korean-U.S. connection foregrounded a transnational adoption industry exporting orphans and relinquished infants and children from half of the peninsula. Between 1976 and 1994 (except for 1991), South Korea was the largest source country of adoptees sent to the U.S. The presence of Korean adoptees has been significant in the U.S.-led adoption industry: every year from 1976 to 1985 (except for 1979), over 50 percent of all foreign adoptees to U.S. adoptive parents were Korean.²¹ Adoptee migration to the U.S. reached a pinnacle

Sourcebook, eds. In-Jin Yoon and Young-Hun Jeong (Gyeonggi-do: The Academy of Korean Studies Press, 2017), 7.

¹⁹ Han-Kyo Kim, "The Korean Independence Movement in the United States: Syngman Rhee, An Ch'ang-Ho and Pak Yong-Man," in *Korean-Americans: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Ilpyong J. Kim (Elizabeth: Hollym, 2004), 63-97.

²⁰ Bruce Cummings, *The Origins of the Korean War: Liberation and Emergence of Separate Regimes, 1945-1947* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981).

²¹ Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Statistical Yearbook, 1979-2001*; Office of Immigration Statistics, *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics, 2002-2009*. A detailed history of transnational adoption from Korea to the U.S. is explained in chapter 3.

during the post-1965 increase of Korean immigration, with Korean adoptees comprising “an estimated 10 percent of the total Korean American population.”²² As with Korean adoptees, Korean military brides also hold a significant place in the history of the Korean diaspora in the U.S. In the four decades post-Korean War, more than 100,000 Korean women married American GIs and came to the U.S.²³ Analyzing Korean military brides’ traumatic experiences and politics of affect, Grace M. Cho views “the Korean diaspora in the United States as another site of transgenerational haunting [...] in that the ghost is engendered in the private realm of family secrets, secrets that are inextricable from the abuses of political power.”²⁴

²² Eleana J. Kim, *Adopted Territory: Transnational Korean Adoptees and the Politics of Belonging* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 21.

²³ Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 9.

²⁴ Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 11. Cho defines *yanggongju* (양공주) as Korean women who have intimate relations with Americans. In a pejorative sense it refers to a woman who is a sex worker and/or military bride for U.S. servicemen in Korea. Cho views *yanggongju* as “the bearer of secrets about the traumas of the Korean War and U.S.-Korea relations—and, in many cases, about her own past. [...] The war bride, as the pioneer of Korean migration to the United States, then operates as a figure for the disappearance of geopolitical violence into the realm of the domestic.” *Ibid.*, 14.

During the years of political-military dictatorships under the regimes of Park Chung-hee (1963-1979) and Chun Doo-hwan (1980-1988), the Korean government and leading companies actively encouraged emigration to developed Western countries including the U.S. in order to regulate domestic population and lower the unemployment rate. Some Koreans also chose immigration to escape political oppression and social instability. In the U.S., the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 (also known as the Hart-Celler Act) had a huge impact on Asian immigration including Korean immigration. Up until 1965, the U.S. had passed immigration and naturalization laws that were solely based on race and thus discriminated against non-Caucasian immigrants.²⁵ The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 eventually extended to Japanese and Asian Indians and the Immigration Act of 1924 barred all Asians from legal immigration with a zero quota allotment for all of Asia.²⁶ Even though Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, and in 1952 all Asians were permitted to immigrate to the U.S., the quota was limited to 2,000 individuals.²⁷ The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 reversed all other Acts and allowed for 170,000 visas per year for Eastern Hemisphere citizens and limited Western Hemisphere immigrants to 120,000 per year.²⁸ Due to these immigration directives and policies both in Korea and the U.S., the population of the Korean diaspora in the U.S. in particular steadily increased up to the late 1980s. During

²⁵ Gabriel J. Chin and Rose Cuison Villazor, eds. *The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965: Legislating a New America* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

the 1970s and 1980s, ethnic enclaves of Korean immigrants evolved mostly around geographical centers such as Flushing in New York and Los Angeles in California, and Koreans excelled as entrepreneurs in self-employed businesses such as dry cleaning and grocery shops, anchoring themselves around Christian churches.²⁹ In-Jin Yoon remarks that “thirty-five thousand Koreans immigrated to the U.S. each year between 1985 and 1987—the peak of immigration for Koreans—making Korea the third largest immigration country to the U.S. following Mexico and the Philippines.”³⁰ Angie Y. Chung, however, warns that stereotypical representations of Korean American ethnically unified communities composed of small business owners and hard-working, non-complaining workers hold the danger of overlooking the internal complexities that these

²⁹ John Lie, “Korean Diaspora and Diasporic Nationalism,” in *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society*, ed. Youna Kim (London: Routledge, 2017), 249. Pyoung Gap Min notes that in between the 1980s and the 2010s Korean ethnic self-segregation lessened and business-related intergroup conflicts nearly disappeared due to the decrease of self-employed businesses, better communication with non-Korean workers and changing self-employed businesses from retail to service industries. See Pyoung Gap Min, “Changes in Korean Immigrants’ Business Patterns,” in *Koreans in North America: Their Twenty-First Century Experiences*, ed. Pyoung Gap Min (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013), 57-74.

³⁰ Yoon, “Onward Migration of Overseas Koreans and Pluralization of the Overseas Korean Community,” 9.

groups of people have experienced in terms of class difference, residential disparity, and intergenerational gap.³¹

In 1989, Korea's loosening of overseas trip regulations marked the beginning of the new Korean diaspora that set off an increase of transnational mobility in and out of Korea.³² Since the 1990s, the Korean diaspora was not just driven by nation-state directives or Korean conglomerates to export labor but also by individual immigrants pursuing financial success and educational opportunity. Particularly during this period, incoming Korean immigrants to the U.S. were often fervent believers in the American dream.³³ Korean nationals were strongly programmed by this powerfully mass media-fed narrative of America as a country where they could realize their yearning for upward mobility, better education, and equal opportunity for themselves and their future generations. This myth blinded newcomers to the real difficulties of language, communication, and cultural differences, and to confrontational systemic oppression such as racism and racialized sexism in the U.S. The self-sacrificial first generation immigrant

³¹ Angie Y. Chung, *Legacies of Struggle: Conflict and Cooperation in Korean American Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

³² "Complete Liberation of Oversea Trip Regulations," 海外(해외)여행 완전自由化(자유화), *Maeil Business News Korea*, April 2, 1988.

³³ During the 1990s, Korean mass media popularized this term by writing about both the "success" story of the American dream such as becoming a business owner in the U.S., and the "failure" narrative such as becoming a drug abuser or returning to Korea. See "1,300 Immigrants to the U.S. per Day: American Dream," 아메리칸 드림: 이민 하루 1,300 명, *Kyunghyang Shinmun*, November 26, 1996.

family's pursuit of the American dream has often become a trigger for intergenerational conflict with 1.5 and second generations who did not always follow their parents' conviction of pursuing materialistic success.³⁴

In the 1960s and 1970s, East Asian Americans, particularly Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans, became the signifiers of the "model" minority. Its "desirable" features for inclusion into American society included working hard, having a close-knit family, being disciplined, delaying gratification, being non-confrontational, and holding contempt for government social subsidies.³⁵ Korean Americans as a new emerging community since the 1980s were taken in by this fabricated Asianness in the U.S. Ju Yon Kim points out that "in the late 1980s and early 1990s, friction in inner-city neighborhoods belied the innocuousness of the model minority myth, as Korean American merchants and black customers in economically depressed areas became engaged in a struggle over limited resources that was exacerbated by racial stereotyping of both groups."³⁶ Media representations contributed to the dissemination of racial stereotypes imposed upon the two groups, such as the successful Korean entrepreneur

³⁴ The 1.5 Korean American generation refers to Korean-born children who immigrated as infants or young teenagers with their parents to the United States. See Jenny Hyun Chung Pak, *Korean American Women: Stories of Acculturation and Changing Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 36.

³⁵ Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.

³⁶ Ju Yon Kim, *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied Everyday* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 12.

bolstered by the Asian American model minority myth and the impoverished African American as an urban underclass member. In 1992, Korean immigrant families were put in the spotlight by national media due to highly violent interracial conflicts between African Americans and Korean Americans during the L.A. riots. A sensation-seeking mainstream media focused on the violent acts against each racial/ethnic group while dismissing the factors contributing to those interracial conflicts: class disparity, poverty, dearth of leadership, lack of understanding of cultural differences, and the lack of police intervention to protect non-white citizens during the riots. Regarding the L.A. riots and their historical remnants, it should be highlighted that African American and Korean American communities have since then used grass-root activist efforts to build peace and coalition across racial, ethnic, and class lines.³⁷ According to Daniel J. Schwegendiek, the immigration of Koreans to the U.S. peaked in the 1990s then slowed due to a rapidly expanding South Korean economy and improved political conditions.³⁸

Korean Diaspora in the Age of Global and Digital Worlds

Korean diasporic communities in the U.S. are not coherently unified, having divergent interests in terms of sexuality, political stance, spirituality, and citizenship.³⁹

³⁷ The L.A. riots will be discussed further in the section about Diana Son's *Satellites* in chapter 1.

³⁸ Daniel J. Schwegendiek, *South Korea: A Socioeconomic Overview from the Past to Present* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 88.

³⁹ JeeYeun Lee examines the issues of Korean American identity regarding queer culture in the United States. JeeYeun Lee, "Towards a Queer Korean-American Diasporic

These polymorphic forms of the Korean diaspora within and beyond the U.S. borders came about due to the ease of transnational mobility and the Korean government's determination for globalization and drive for "Americanization." While education-oriented migration to the U.S. was popular ever since the early twentieth century in Korea, the aggressive governmental globalization project since the late 1990s continued the steady increase of temporary and provisional Korean diaspora in the U.S for further education.⁴⁰ English language education became considered as a necessary personal asset for upward mobility and an ideological tool to differentiate oneself from others. This study abroad educational trend was so remarkable that it attracted a significant number of international students from early kindergartners to university students to English-speaking countries, and in particular the U.S.⁴¹ Their education completed, temporary

History," in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, eds. David Eng and Alice Hom (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 185-212.

⁴⁰ From 1997 to 2010, the top three countries with international students in the U.S. are China, India, and Korea. For one decade, the number of Korean international students gradually increased in the U.S. See the table 2.4 Annual Number of International Students for Top Three Countries of Origin, Pyoung Gap Min, "The Immigration of Koreans to the United States: A Review of Forty Five Year (1965-2009) Trends," in *Koreans in North America*, 25-6; Institute of International Education.

⁴¹ Youna Kim writes that in "international comparison, Korea has the third largest absolute number of university students studying abroad in institutions of higher education. The number tripled from about 54,000 in 1991 to 160,000 in 2003 and continued to 190,000 in 2006. The top five destination countries and the approximate

Korean diasporic individuals chose either to stay in their hostlands or to return to Korea. Most recently, in 2011, an amended Nationality Act by the Korean government recognized permanent dual citizenship for any national who meets eligibility conditions under the Act. The Amendment permits an individual holding dual citizenship by birth, such as a U.S. born child whose parents are South Korean, to preserve both citizenships. Prior to this, the individual was obligated to select one citizenship and would automatically lose Korean citizenship by a set deadline.⁴² In this sense, the Korean diaspora from both Korea and the U.S. blurs the demarcation of national belonging and redefines the meaning of becoming a Korean diasporic figure in a transnational world. Youna Kim asserts that “there is no unified Korean diasporic identity or culture; the disparate fates of diasporic communities prevented the creation of a common identity and organization. For instance, Korean language or culture did not dominate in many Korean

number of Korean students in each country are the US (53,000), Japan (22,000), Australia (12,000), as well as Germany (5,200) and the UK (4,000) becoming popular destinations in recent years.” Kim, *Transnational Migration, Media and Identity of Asian Women*, 23.

⁴² On January 1, 2011, the Nationality Act No. 10275 of May 4, 2010 (amended from Act No. 8892 of Mar. 14, 2008) came into law by the Ministry of Justice of South Korea. Sayuri Umeda, “South Korea: Permanent Dual Nationality Allowed after 60 Years,” *Global Legal Monitor*, August 24, 2010, <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/south-korea-permanent-dual-nationality-allowed-after-60-years/>. Also see Statutes of the Republic of Korea, “Nationality Act,” accessed January 07, 2018, http://elaw.klri.re.kr/eng_mobile/viewer.do?hseq=18840&type=part&key=7.

diasporic populations. Korean diaspora lacks a lingua franca or a common consciousness.”⁴³ Thus, discussing Korean diasporic experiences and consciousness can contribute to our understanding of an incomplete world in which contemporary constructions and interactions between people, cultures, and nations are constantly in flux and where the transnational dis/continuity of human flow engenders issues of child, women, adoptee and human rights. It is my hope that this project will not only present the reader with a more complete picture of the issues specific to the Korean diaspora, but also demonstrate how the complexities of that diaspora parallel an ever greater number of diasporas in our increasingly globalized world. Indeed, liminal diasporic peoples’ experiences and their quests for distinct and diverse identities and belonging are greatly at odds with the crushing trend toward homogeneity that is the hallmark of globalization.

Avtar Brah writes that “diasporas are the sites of hope and new beginnings.”⁴⁴

This dissertation focuses on the significance of analyzing the Korean diaspora as an expression of hope that is implicitly and/or explicitly expressed through performances. Moreover, Michel S. Laguerre writes that “diaspora has become a terrain of contention to obtain equality of status, the emancipation of the self, and the practice of social justice.”⁴⁵

⁴³ Youna Kim, “Global Korea,” in *Routledge Handbook of Korean Culture and Society*, ed. Youna Kim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 247.

⁴⁴ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 193.

⁴⁵ Michel S. Laguerre, *The Postdiaspora Condition: Crossborder Social Protection, Transnational Schooling, and Extraterritorial Human Security* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15.

Thus, in addition to the celebratory discourse on hybridity by which diasporas are often characterized, and the discussion on inequality that the concept of diasporas generates, these performances of the Korean diaspora enact “the practice of social justice” disrupting the institutionalized systems of power in relation to gender, sexuality, and nationality. By envisioning new possibilities for diasporic spaces, bodies, experiences, and communities in the tumultuous twenty-first-century United States, the performances accentuate a sense of hope and a call for justice in their critique of the coercive reification of identity and culture.

Analyzing the connection between mass mediation and migration, Arjun Appadurai theorizes that “diasporic public spheres [...] are no longer small, marginal, or exceptional. They are part of the cultural dynamic of urban life in most countries and continents, in which migration and mass mediation coconstitute a new sense of the global as modern and the modern as global.”⁴⁶ A slightly different view is that of David Oh who considers transnational media as a realm with potential for diasporic individuals and communities to formulate and reinforce a link to their perceived homelands, thus offering a symbolic substance that leads them to configure identities in ways that possibly revolt against marginalization.⁴⁷ Youna Kim expands on this idea as she argues that “diasporic media space is a transnational site of contestation, in which nation, race, gender, class,

⁴⁶ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 10.

⁴⁷ David Oh, *Second-Generation Korean Americans and Transnational Media: Diasporic Identifications* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2015).

culture and language continuously interrelate to produce complex identities.”⁴⁸ With regard to this formation of diasporic public/media sphere, I analyze diasporic dramatic and artistic spaces—here the performances of the Korean diaspora—that posit crucial issues of liminal belonging pertaining to race, class, gender, and sexuality, and unveil experiences of kinship and citizenship across Korea and the United States. These performances open up critical dialogues about insecurity, vulnerability, uncertainty, ambiguity that are the consequences of liminal belonging. Through these performance spaces where performing bodies, language and characters, interactions with audience and community, even artists’ own experiences merge and collide, the performances of the Korean diaspora thus manifest artistic and activist messages that challenge obsolete representations, create new discourses, and offer change for the future.

Review of Literature: Contemporary Performances of the Korean Diaspora

Since 1990, the visibility of plays written by Korean American playwrights has grown and a number of anthologies of Asian American plays have been published. *But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise*, edited by Velina Hasu Houston with a foreword by Roberta Uno embraces one play written by a Korean American dramatist, Sung Rno’s *Cleveland Raining* (1995).⁴⁹ *Asian American Drama*, edited by Brian Nelson also includes one Korean American play, Rob Shin’s *The Art of Waiting* (1991). In his editor’s notes for *The Art of Waiting*, Nelson writes about the rise of racial conflicts between Korean/Korean Americans and African Americans presented in film and theatre by non-

⁴⁸ Kim, *Transnational Migration, Media and Identity of Asian Women*, 10.

⁴⁹ Velina Hasu Houston, ed. *But Still, Like Air, I’ll Rise* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

Korean artists and asks: “where were the Korean American dramatists?”⁵⁰ The anthology *Asian American Plays for a New Generation*, co-edited by Josephine Lee, Don Eitel, and R. A. Shiomi, offers *Asiamnesia* (2008) written by Sun Mee Chomet, a Korean American adoptee dramatist whose work *How to Be a Korean Woman* (2012) is discussed in my dissertation.⁵¹ A collection of Young Jean Lee’s plays entitled *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* marks the first Korean American drama anthology by a single author.⁵²

Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas is an inspiring anthology that motivated me to study the Korean diasporic theater in the Americas. In her introduction, Esther Kim Lee mentions “the plays in this collection remind us that the Korean diasporic condition—real or imagined—can be made

⁵⁰ Brian Nelson, ed. *Asian American Drama: 9 Plays from the Multiethnic Landscape* (New York: Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1997), 327.

⁵¹ Josephine Lee, Don Eitel, and R. A. Shiomi, eds. *Asian American Plays for a New Generation* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

⁵² Young Jean Lee will be the first Asian American woman playwright whose work, *Straight White Men*, will be presented on Broadway. This drama about a Caucasian family set during a Christmas Holiday premiered at the Public Theater in New York in 2014. Lee is one of the prominent Korean American theater artists who created critically-acclaimed works. See Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009); Young Jean Lee, *Straight White Men* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, Inc., 2017).

known.”⁵³ Lee’s introduction encompasses the definition, scope, and features of the theater of the Korean diaspora. Her selections include plays dealing with Korean culture, such as the concept of a Korean person’s sixtieth birthday in Lloyd Suh’s *American Hwangap*. My research builds upon this foundational overview of the Korean diaspora in the Americas, conceptualizing liminal belonging as it pertains to the experience and identity formation of Korean American family, women, and adoptees.

Another work by Lee, *A History of Asian American Theater*, is based on interviews and archival research and provides “an introduction to the who, what, where, how, and why of Asian American theatre,”⁵⁴ documenting the historical context of the birth and growth of Asian American theatre. Lee explains the three waves of Asian American theater: the first wave consists of the first four theater companies that shaped Asian American theater in the 1960s and 1970s; the second wave challenges mainstream theater of the 1980s through the visibility of Asian American theater; and emerging in the 1990s, the third wave of artists negate “the binary choice [between being ethnic or whitening out their ethnicity as theater artists] and the responsibility of representing their entire group. Instead, [the third-wave artists] began to tell their individual stories, in which the Asian American identity is only a part of their complex experience.”⁵⁵ The play and performance analyses in my investigation spotlight Korean diasporic dramatists and performing artists who belong to this pool of third-wave Asian American theater,

⁵³ Lee, *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, xvi.

⁵⁴ Esther Kim Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 6.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 203.

thus strengthening the discourses of Korean diasporic theater for the next wave and beyond.

Josephine Lee's *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage*—a pioneering work that has contributed to the formation of a scholarly bridge between Theater and Performance Studies and Asian American Studies—conceptualizes Asian American theater as a critical subject, examining race and ethnicity pertaining to Asian American experience and identity.⁵⁶ Although this monograph does not fully discuss Korean adoption theater and does not have a specific focus on Korean American artists in theater and performance, Lee investigates early works about Korean adoption and adoptees produced by Theater Mu (later Mu Performing Arts) with *Mask Dance* (1993 and 1995) and *The Walleye Kid* (1998) in “Asian America Is in the Heartland: Performing Korean Adoptee Experience.” In this article, Lee discusses how the representations of Korean adoptees and their experiences in both productions reveal the complexity of North American racial politics.⁵⁷ In my third chapter, I concentrate on adoptees’ autobiographical representations of birth searches and reunions.

⁵⁶ Josephine Lee, *Performing Asian America: Race and Ethnicity on the Contemporary Stage* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997).

⁵⁷ Josephine Lee, “Asian America Is in the Heartland: Performing Korean Adoptee Experience,” in *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*, eds. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 102-116. Also see Keiko Furuki, “‘Masking’ and ‘Unmasking’ Korean Adoptees—On Rick Shiomi’s *Mask Dance*,” *EurAmerica* 41, no. 4 (2011): 949-974.

Other works reveal how bodies become a realm for epistemological examination of racial formation in the U.S. in terms of both Asian American Studies and Theater and Performance Studies. David Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* focuses on constructions of Asian American identities throughout the history of Asians in the U.S. Palumbo-Liu notes that the significant elements used to construct Asian America such as "immigration law, scientific racism, economic and social policies, and cultural practices," were all based on notions and "imaginings of the racialized Asian/American body and psyche."⁵⁸ Karen Shimakawa's *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* scrutinizes the relation between affect and the theatrical representation of Asian Americans in the U.S. that creates a distorted, discomforted, and disconnected dimension of the Asian American body on stage and in theater history.⁵⁹ In addition, *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* offers an interdisciplinary analysis of multiple Asian American art works that disrupt normativity and hegemony in terms of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality.⁶⁰ Delving into the relationships between body, habit, and identity in various modes of Asian American performances such as theater, literature, film, and online video performance, Ju Yon Kim's *The Racial Mundane: Asian American Performance and the Embodied*

⁵⁸ David Palumbo-Liu, *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 7.

⁵⁹ Karen Shimakawa, *National Abjection: The Asian American Body Onstage* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁶⁰ Laura Kina and Jan Christian Bernabe, eds. *Queering Contemporary Asian American Art* (Seattle: University Of Washington Press, 2017).

Everyday theorizes the embodied everyday as a “vital lens through which to reexamine the supposed paradox of Asian American racial formation.”⁶¹ In particular, the chapter entitled “Making Change: Interracial Conflict, Cross-Racial Performance” analyzes the embodiment of Korean American merchants during the L.A. riots in *Kimchee and Chitlins* by Elizabeth Wong (1990) and Anna Deavere Smith’s *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992* (1993). In this dissertation, I also view Korean/Asian/American body in contemporary theater and performance works as a performative text that disrupts space and time to envision a new understanding of racial and ethnic identity, community, and belonging.

Two recent articles about two Korean American playwrights find a common imagining of the Korean diaspora as a continuum connecting Korea and Korean America. A 2016 publication by Elizabeth Son focuses on first-generation Korean American writer Chungmi Kim and three versions of her play—the one-act version *The Comfort Women* (1995), the subsequent full-length *Hanako* (1999), and the Korean language version *Nabi* (2005-9)—about the approximately two hundred thousand girls and women sexually enslaved by the Japanese Imperial military army for the “comfort” of their troops before and during World War II.⁶² Although her article “Transpacific Acts Of Memory” centers

⁶¹ Kim, *Racial Mundane*, 19.

⁶² Elizabeth W. Son, “Transpacific Acts of Memory: The Afterlives of Hanako,” *Theatre Survey* 57, no. 2 (2016): 264–74. Son’s recently published book, *Embodied Reckonings*, examines how surviving Korean sexual slaves (also known as “comfort women”), activists, and artists have employed performance means to demand justice and redress.

on Kim's play(s) about "comfort women," Son writes that the playwright's setting of her story in the United States "frames it as a transnational Asian American narrative."⁶³ As such, the article speaks of immigration, Korean diaspora, memory (especially traumatic memories associated with homeland), and how the United States becomes a "site for remembering for second-generation Asian Americans [allowing] the playwright to explore the participation of Asian Americans, particularly those of Korean descent, in the transnational social movement."⁶⁴ Ju Yon Kim's "In the Space Made from Separation" analyzes playwright Mia Chung's 2012 to 2017 productions of *You for Me for You*.⁶⁵ By examining the play's story of two sisters separated as they left North Korea, one arriving in the United States, the other trapped at the North Korean border with China, Kim points up issues about Korean American immigration and the extension of American power via the Korean diaspora, and communicates how "a diasporic feeling of simultaneous estrangement and attachment [is] connected to a history of migration."⁶⁶ Following this idea of a contested conjunction across Korea and Korean America, I interpret the Korean diaspora in theater as a practice of forming diasporic continuum which allows us to contextualize various types of social constructions such as race, class, gender, and

See *Embodied reckonings: "Comfort Women," Performance, and Transpacific Redress* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2018).

⁶³ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 268.

⁶⁵ Ju Yon Kim, "In the Space Made from Separation: Korean American Performances of North Korea in Revision," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 20, no. 3 (2017): 313-343.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 319.

sexuality both in “homeland” and in hostland in which belonging is transnationally constructed, reconstructed, and/or deconstructed.

Rey Chow uses the term diaspora as an incursion against essentialist narratives derived from Orientalist philosophy and sexist nationalism.⁶⁷ Chow states that “the weight of old ideologies being reinforced over and over again is immense”; thus, the performances of the Korean diaspora are an imaginative interrogation in which history, experiences, and identities are resituated, disrupted, and transformed within and beyond the North American boundaries.⁶⁸ The strategic expressions of the performances are heterogeneous rather than homogeneous, polyvocal rather than univocal, and extra- or inter-territorial rather than territorial. My dissertation on Korean diasporic theater and performance not only sheds a new light on the intersected research fields of Theater and Performance Studies and Asian/Korean Diaspora Studies, but also magnifies contemporary discourses on Asian/Korean American racial and gender politics in the U.S., charting actual and imagined experiences of liminal belonging on stage and in performance between the U.S. and Korea. Performing the Korean diaspora is essential to

⁶⁷ Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 17.

⁶⁸ “Essentialist notions of culture and history; conservative notions of territorial and linguistic propriety, and the ‘otherness’ ensuing from them; unattested claims of oppression and victimization that are used merely to guilt-trip and to control; sexist and racist reaffirmations of sexual and racial diversities that are made merely in the name of righteousness—all these forces create new ‘solidarities’ whose ideological premises remain unquestioned.” Ibid.

attack the outdated yet constantly reinforced Orientalist/racist and sexist ideologies that Chow so adeptly identifies.

Outline

This dissertation starts with an analysis of Korean American families in Diana Son's *Satellites* (2006), Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* (2007), and Julia Cho's *Aubergine* (2016). Broadly interpreting ritualistic Korean cultural elements utilized in these three plays, I argue that home becomes a space that reimagines the Korean diaspora as a trans-historical, interracial, and cross-cultural construction. Depicting an important life stage such as a child's one hundredth-day celebration, a sixtieth birthday, and a deathwatch, each play dramatizes how Korean American family members negotiate with these moments in life with a Korean cultural appreciation of each life event. Not only do these dramatic engagements with the conceptual element of rites of passage offer the plays a depth of interpretation of life and death, but the spatial configurations in the three plays reflect the transformative condition of the Korean diaspora in the process of revealing how homecoming, homemaking, and homebreaking are mutually integrated into each play. In this chapter, I conceptualize the construction and spatial imagination of liminal belonging through the dramatization of Korean diasporic families. I demonstrate how the house as a spatial construction where family members of different generations, cultures, and races meet, confront, and reconcile with each other, visually discloses states of the Korean diaspora. In the three plays, this architecture of liminal belonging does not entrap becoming a Korean diaspora with pessimism but rather renovates its space as an area for diasporic hope in between histories, generations, and memories.

I develop this notion of liminal belonging in the following chapter by examining the Korean diasporic female body in performance such as Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy acts (2017), Dohee Lee's ritual performances (2017), and visual artist Miru Kim's photographed site-specific performance (2008). Laying out the three different genres, Cho's queer Koreanness on stage, Lee's embodiment of Korean shamanism, and Kim's naked body in public spaces manifest a diversification of the Korean diaspora that exemplifies the efficacy of engaging with the concept of belonging through body as a liminal conduit. To be specific, these artists' subversive bodily compositions as a medium not only disrupt the sexual, spiritual, and spatial normalcy that molded a racialized femininity within U.S. society but also formulate a utopic community of extraordinary care. These three Korean diasporic women artists have in common the disruptive uses of their body to challenge normativity with regard to diversity within sexual identities, ethnic solidarity, spiritual engagement for communal communication, and spatial relationship. Queering the worlds and experimenting within a community through their bodily engagements are their way of formulating a new sense of belonging through performance.⁶⁹ Moreover, using their bodies as a realm to generate and/or transmit emotions such as anger, mournfulness, and loneliness in the three different forms of performance, the Korean diasporic women artists implicitly and/or explicitly disseminate a ray of hope for the trans/formations of community.

⁶⁹ The term queer here is broadly applied to the differentiation, defamiliarization, and deterritorialization of normativity in terms of sexuality, spirituality, and spatiality that governs socio-cultural meanings of what it means to be a woman and part of the diaspora.

The last chapter investigates the complication of liminal belonging in contemporary representations of transnational experiences such as birth search and reunion in Korean American adoptees' autobiographical theater including solo performances by Sun Mee Chomet in *How to Be a Korean Woman* (2012) and Marissa Lichwick in *Yellow Dress* (2012), and Eric Sharp's full-cast play *Middle Brother* (2014). These theater pieces complicate what it means for Korean American adoptees to be part of the Korean diaspora by disclosing the artists' pre- and post-adoption experiences both in the U.S. and South Korea. The artists—through their testimony-performances—also create a space of witnessing the history and practices of transnational adoption. With their works representing their own liminal experiences, Chomet, Lichwick, and Sharp unveil their complicated belonging by deconstructing false beliefs about transnational adoption and revealing racial, gendered, and class scripts, as well as citizenship and kinship scripts, forced upon them by both Korean and American cultures. In addition, the performances of these three Korean American adoptee artists also expose the politics and economics that brought about transnational adoption as a trade and how race and patriarchy have played a part in the oppression of women and the trafficking of children. The significance of these pieces launches crucial questions connecting adoptees' rights to fundamental women's, children's and human rights. Cautious about the problematic classification of Korean adoptees as a part of the Korean diaspora, the chapter particularly focuses on the three autobiographical stories that explicitly disclose liminal position and identity experiences in the course of adoptees being exposed to both Korean and American cultures. The three artists thus reconfigure the definition of Korean diasporic history as a voluntary act of mobilizing oneself in a one-way movement from Korea to the U.S., but

most importantly, the performances make public the realm of a “forgotten/forced” diaspora—that of Korean adoptees in the U.S. and their birth search and reunion narratives from the despair of injustice to the hope for redress.

It is impossible to make an argument about the nature of spectatorship without obtaining hard data as to the specifics of the racial and ethnic composition and gender and sexual identifications of audiences for the entire run of each production and performance that I discussed in this dissertation. The viewing audience of the productions I attended was mainly white within fairly large theatrical venues in Los Angeles and New York. The audience both at Julia Cho’s *Aubergine* and Dohee Lee’s *Mu/巫* was predominantly white with some spectators of East Asian descendant (I heard some speaking Korean). Audiences at both Margaret Cho’s *PsyCHO* and *Fresh Off the Bloat*, performed in New York City, were diverse in terms of race, gender, and sexuality, but Asian spectators were relatively small in number. Chicago proved to be an exception where Asian spectators were a majority at a smaller community theatre production of Lloyd Suh’s *American Hwangap* and in a very small performance space where I saw Marissa Lichwick’s *Yellow Dress* performed as part of a Korean adoptee community event. In my opinion, these performances of the Korean diaspora offer an intimate experience of and for Korean or Korean American audiences whether or not they relate to the story, characters, or performers. All of the works discussed in this study, however, present an opportunity in which non-Korean audiences can crossover through seeing, participating, and feeling the Korean diasporic experiences on stage and in performance space.

The three chapters of my dissertation disclose the experiences and identities of the Korean diaspora embodying Korean cultures, history, and memory as the nine artists chosen across a wide range of theatre and performance works show that belonging is liminal and hopeful. For these artists who configure, diversify, and complicate the Korean diaspora, belonging may be something they search for but, in the end, it is something they come to realize that they must create for themselves before they can offer to express it to audiences in the form of healing and reconciliation.

CHAPTER 1

FROM KOREAN AMERICAN HOME TO A SPACE OF LIMINAL BELONGING:
THE CONFIGURATION OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN FAMILY DRAMAS**Introduction**

The subject of home is inextricable from discussion of the diaspora in the United States because home is a primary social construction through which family members experience issues of identity formation, cultural or generational conflict, and negotiation and tension pertaining to ethnic and racial difference in the North American context. To analyze the interrelated relationship between diaspora and home, I selected Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* (2007), Diana Son's *Satellites* (2006), and Julia Cho's *Aubergine* (2016).⁷⁰ These plays dramatize the variations of a Korean American family as imagined by 1.5 generation Korean American playwrights employing Korean cultural rites of passages: *American Hwangap* depicts a sixtieth birthday as the center of the narrative of a prodigal Korean American father's homecoming to the United States; an infant's upcoming hundredth-day birthday, casually mentioned by a Korean nanny character,

⁷⁰ I attended a 2017 Chicago production of *American Hwangap* directed by Helen Young, co-produced by Halcyon Theatre and A-Squared Theatre. In 2016, I attended the New York premiere of *Aubergine* directed by Kate Whoriskey at Playwrights Horizons' Mainstage Theater. For the analysis of *Satellites*, I used the text in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas* edited by Esther Kim Lee.

symbolically integrates into the inter-racial couple's survival story of *Satellites*; and family members prepare for and face the death of a beloved at home in *Aubergine*.

In the process of embodying Korean cultural experiences as imagined interventions, these three plays formulate the Korean diaspora on stage by placing home in specific relationships: in *American Hwangap*, home is found between histories; in *Satellites* between races; and in *Aubergine* between cultures. In all three plays the space of home is used—through the stage configurations, layouts, and set changes—as a concept to reflect meanings of relationships between characters, nations, and memories for Korean American families. In *American Hwangap* spaces are vertically aligned but separated. The house's basement, main floor, upstairs bedroom and the garden's tree bottom and top represent Korea's splintered history and the Chun family's divided history. As in *American Hwangap*, there is a vertical alignment of space in *Satellites* in which the Brooklyn brownstone has three levels. The interracial couple's new house, constantly under construction, is symbolic of the chaotic interplay of racial, ethnic, social, and psychological spaces which the characters inhabit, move between, and/or are restricted to/from. In *Aubergine*, the characters' memories connect Korean and/or American cultures through horizontal spaces. Characters and objects move laterally throughout the malleable organization of the stage space in the non-linearity of the story but the characters' memories move through time to other spaces where events occurred: a kitchen late at night, a hectic restaurant kitchen, a poor student's dining table in Korea, and a refugee camp.

Interwoven with the theme of the space of home is the theme of the Korean intruder as in all three plays, a Korean “outsider” not only intrudes on the lives of the

characters but becomes a catalyst for events that follow their infringement of physical spaces and emotional boundaries. The “Koreanness” of these Korean intruders encroaches on the already configured Korean American home and unearths issues that trigger unresolved conflicts within the family unit. The intruders bring with them Korean cultural experiences that transform the idea of home as a stable and fixed space, thus initiating factors of re-mapping the cartography of Korean American home toward a space of liminal belonging.

The plays contest the North American master narratives of the American dream and model minority; moreover, they clash with the demarcations of the ethnic and national boundary. These contested configurations of the Korean diaspora in the dramatic works do not attempt to achieve the playwrights’ quest for their ethnic roots or to express a nostalgic feeling about the culture of their ancestors. Rather, this chapter argues that the Korean American home in the three plays becomes a space of liminal belonging. This generative imagination interacts with history, race, and culture, which mediate the multiple identities and diverse experiences of the humans who occupy and reside in that structure. In this sense, I conceptualize theatricalized home as the site of the new configuration of the Korean diaspora, de-territorializing provincialism and ethnocentrism and re-territorializing a liminal location of the Korean diaspora with a hopeful future. The Korean diaspora, thus configured, exists as a space intersecting with Korean history, racial and ethnic tension in the United States, and cross-cultural and intergenerational struggle and reconciliation.

Ritual for a Rebirth in Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap*

Lloyd Suh is a New York City-based playwright and a member of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab since 2004. Suh's plays include *Masha No Home* (2002), *The Garden Variety* (2006), *The Children of Vonderly* (2007), *Happy End of the World* (2010), *Jesus in India* (2012), *Great Wall Story* (2012), *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!* (2013), and *Charles Francis Chan Jr's Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* (2015). Some of his shorter plays include *With a Hammer & A Nail* (2002), *Not All Korean Girls Can Fly* (2006), and *Happy Birthday William Abernathy* (2008). *Masha No Home* premiered in 2002 at the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York and in 2003 produced by East West Players in Los Angeles. *Charles Francis Chan Jr's Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* was produced at the National Asian American Theater Company (NAATCO) in 2015, in 2017 at the Guthrie Theatre by Mu Performing Arts and at Princeton University. *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!* had its world premiere at the Children's Theatre Company in 2013 and was staged at La Mama by the Ma-Yi Theater Company in 2014. Suh's *Great Wall Story* opened at the Denver Center Theatre Company in 2012.⁷¹ The world premiere of *Jesus in India*

⁷¹ "About Lloyd Suh," Ma-Yi Theater Company, accessed January 24, 2017, <http://ma-yitheatre.org/labbies/lloyd-suh/>. Lloyd Suh has received support from the NEA Arena Stage New Play Development program, NYFA, NYSCA, Jerome Foundation, TCG and Dramatists Guild. His plays have been published by Samuel French, Playscripts, Smith & Kraus, Duke University Press and American Theater magazine. Suh is an alum of Youngblood and the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and from 2005-2010 served as Artistic Director of Second Generation and Co-Director of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab. He

occurred at San Francisco's Magic Theatre in 2012 and its New York debut was produced by the Ma-Yi Theater in 2013.⁷² *American Hwangap* (2009) is one of Suh's full-length plays, the world premiere of which was directed by Trip Cullman in San Francisco at the Magic Theatre in 2009; its New York premiere was at the Wild Project Theater, produced by Ma-Yi Theater and the Play Company, also in 2009; the Asian premiere was at Tanghalang Pilipino at Cultural Center of the Philippines in 2010. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation supported these three productions as a part of the Lark Play Development Center's "Launching New Plays into the Repertoire Initiative." This play also premiered in Korea at the Guerilla Theatre in 2012 produced by the Pacific Conservatory of the Performing Arts (PCPA) and at the Halcyon Theatre in Chicago produced by A-Squared in 2017. Suh was awarded a New York State Council on the Arts Individual Artist grant in 2005 for *American Hwangap*.⁷³

currently serves on the Dramatists Guild Council and has served as Director of Artistic Programs at the Lark since 2011.

⁷² *Jesus in India* was the subject of controversy in 2015 due to a production by Clarion University in Pennsylvania. Outraged by the fact that they had cast two white student actors for the parts of Indian characters, Suh insisted that the parts be recast or cancelled. The production was cancelled. See Diep Tran, "On the Rights of Playwrights and White Tears," *American Theatre*, November 16, 2015, <http://www.americantheatre.org/2015/11/16/on-the-rights-of-playwrights-and-white-tears/>.

⁷³ Lloyd Suh is also a recipient of the New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship both in 2004 and in 2016. He was awarded an Off-Broadway Alliance Award for Best Family

American Hwangap is about a fifty-nine-year-old Korean man, Min Suk Chun, who has been an absent husband and father for fifteen years since his lay-off from an American company. When he returned to South Korea, he left his wife and three children behind in the U.S. The story revolves around Min Suk's homecoming to Texas for his sixtieth birthday, where he reunites with his family but finds himself a familial intruder in the house in which live his ex-wife, Mary, who has been the matriarchal leader since he left, and their youngest son, Ralph, who is an adult. Their daughter, Esther, and their eldest son, David, have already moved out. At the beginning of the play in Scene 3 when Min Suk first arrives in Texas, he tells Esther that he first left the United States because he was fired from his products engineer job due to the obsolescence of his trade. He also talks to her about the fact that when he returned to South Korea, he realized that even there he was "one lifetime too late."⁷⁴ He does not elaborate about his life during those fifteen years, the details of which have been kept from his family in America; however, his secret life story is revealed to the audience through a phone conversation between David and Esther. Arguing that Min Suk should not be accepted by other family members, David reveals to Esther that their father was in prison in South Korea, a fact David discovered when he went to South Korea to invite their father to come to the United States for Esther's first wedding.

Show 2014 and the 2014 American Alliance for Theatre & Education Distinguished Play Award for *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!* See "About Lloyd Suh," accessed January 24, 2017, <http://ma-yitheatre.org/labbies/lloyd-suh/>.

⁷⁴ Lloyd Suh, *American Hwangap* in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, 99.

Each family member welcomes the return of the prodigal father in different ways. David, a thirty-five-year-old investment banker in New York City, is the only family member who will not attend his father's sixtieth birthday celebration. David's reticence about returning for this event reflects his unresolved feelings about his father. David resents his father's irresponsibility and callousness because he cannot accept what his father did to his entire family, leaving it behind, or because he is concealing something about himself just as his father had done to his family. He also does not understand his mother's, sister's, and younger brother's gesture of embracing the father again. David's cold rejection of his father reflects his fears that Min Suk may leave him and his family again; as a result, he refuses to see his father's return as an act of redemption. In Scene 16, although David clearly states "I will not become my father," the act of distancing himself from the family on this occasion makes him seem more like his father.⁷⁵

According to Suh's description of Esther Chun, Esther is a thirty-one-year-old "forever student." She has multiple degrees and is still taking classes after two divorces. When Min Suk arrives in Texas for the first time after his fifteen-year absence, Esther shares an unemotional meal with him at a diner. In her monologue toasting her father's birthday, Esther expresses her mixed feelings about him and his long absence and recalls a telling memory about him:

ESTHER: Funny thing about birthdays. You left just before I turned sixteen, I remember you sent a card. It says "Isn't It Great, You Just Turned Eight." I got nothing the year after, but you did send a Sweet Sixteen card when I turned eighteen. So I actually sent you a sixtieth

⁷⁵ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 139.

birthday card about ten years ago, maybe you got it, I don't know, but I thought at the time you might find it funny. You weren't there for either one of my weddings, but I did get the toaster you sent after my first divorce.⁷⁶

In Scene 13, she reveals to her father that during her second marriage she gave birth to a child who was stillborn. In the *San Francisco Chronicle's* review of the world premiere at the Magic Theatre, Robert Hurwitt states that in *American Hwangap* "questions linger. Memories differ and no one's account of the past or present is completely reliable. Aspects of the siblings' lives and relationships remain unexplained."⁷⁷ This is particularly true about Esther's past and the lives of the two siblings, one in the house and the other in New York. While it is obvious that the three siblings react to their father's homecoming differently in the play, it is unclear the extent to which each of their lives, particularly her troubled past, has been affected by the absence of the father. Esther's emotional reaction toward her mother, who seems to so readily accept Min Suk's return and his presence at home, is clear: resentment. In Scene 10, Mary then flatly tells her that Min Suk didn't come back of his own volition: she invited him for his *hwangap*. Esther is astounded by Mary telling her that asking her ex-husband to come back home was something she did for her, David, and especially Ralph, the youngest son.

⁷⁶ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 103.

⁷⁷ Robert Hurwitt, "More than 6 degrees separate this family," *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 13, 2009, <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/article/More-than-6-degrees-separate-this-family-3245113.php#photo-2393389>.

Mary Chun is Min Suk's fifty-eight-year-old ex-wife, who now speaks proficient English. The difference in language abilities between these two middle-aged people is a measure of how well they have adjusted to American life. She, the well-adapted one—who wants to be called by her new English name, Mary—has become the leader of the family by default in the absence of her husband. Even though Mary invited Min Suk for his sixtieth birthday, she does not accept him right away. Although the night before the party Mary allows a renewal of their (sexual) relationship, in Scene 8 she tells Min Suk: “I’m not the woman you knew, maybe last night was familiar, but I live a different life here, without you, I’m nimble and I’m out in the world, I have a *life*, do you see? Ask anyone in the local real estate game and they’ll tell you, that Mary, she can head’em up and move’em out.”⁷⁸ Mary still has feelings for this man, even though she has changed into a confident and assertive woman.

American Hwangap begins with a monologue by Ralph Chun, the youngest son. Wearing a traditional Korean outfit, *hanbok* (한복) and holding a small cup, he starts talking about a poem he wrote called “American Hwangap.” The play never reveals what the poem sounds like, but I view this entire play as a theatrically composed poem of “American Hwangap” that depicts each family member’s memory, feeling, and future. Suh describes the twenty-nine-year-old Ralph as “brilliant, damaged. Lives in his mother’s basement.”⁷⁹ Whereas David has held on to his anger against his father, and Esther has mixed feelings about him, Ralph seems to care for and want his father back in his life. Ralph’s emotional problem is never stated, but it is understood that he suffered

⁷⁸ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 113-4.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

some kind of mental breakdown that has left him unable to mature emotionally. He does not have a job yet but has some friends in the neighborhood, although all much younger than he is. He is kind-hearted and optimistic yet prone to angry outbursts; he is also quite talented and brilliantly imaginative. In Scene 10, Esther reads to her mother a passage from Ralph's composition book that she found in the basement. Esther is surprised to realize how talented her "damaged" brother is, but Mary confesses that she has read many of Ralph's stories, especially since he has on several occasions left his notebook open on the kitchen counter.

Hwangap (환갑, 還甲) means the age of sixty in East Asian cultures. *Hwangap* symbolizes that you have completed the sexagenary cycle of the lunar calendar, the sum of the ten celestial stems and the twelve terrestrial branches, thus setting off another cycle of life. In the play, when Min Suk states that he's a "baby," it signifies a restart of his life as he finishes the first cycle of life according to this Korean cultural ideology.⁸⁰ In Korea, relatives of the one who just turns sixty traditionally organize a big ceremony to celebrate the sixtieth birthday called *hwangap janchi* (환갑 잔치).⁸¹ The party comprises diverse types of food, congratulatory speeches, and celebratory performances such as songs and dances for guests such as one's neighbors, friends, relatives, colleagues, acquaintances. This

⁸⁰ In the past, a person's average life expectancy was much shorter than sixty, so one's sixtieth birthday means celebrating the person's longevity and wishing a healthier and wealthier life in the next cycle of life. Nowadays, the average life expectancy is much longer, so many Korean people often skip or minimize the size of the ceremony and just partake in a big meal with family members or offer the parents a trip.

⁸¹ In English, *hwangap janchi* is also written as *hwangap janche*.

convivial event not only celebrates longevity and expresses the wish for a better and healthier upcoming life cycle, but also rejoices in the triumphs of a successful financial and family life, the proof of which are the means to invite and feed a number of people with whom the celebrant has established relationships. In other words, *hwangap janchi*, a sixtieth birthday ceremony, is a socio-cultural event at which a guest can measure the host's reputation and the wealth that has been accumulated in the first cycle of his or her life. There are many criteria by which people can evaluate the host's life in a materialistic way: how many people attend, where the party is held, what kind of food is served, and which performers are invited to help celebrate the birthday. In *American Hwangap*, the elaborate festivity of this ceremonial event for life's restart is very much missing from Min Suk's sixtieth birthday, reflecting his assumed "failure," the loss of patriarchal powers, and a revision of the binary power between matriarchy and patriarchy. Instead, each of the characters (except for David in New York) delivers a congratulatory speech as a monologue with no other family members or his friends present. The stage direction of Scene 15, the scene of Min Suk's valedictory speech, explains Min Suk's sixtieth birthday party: "CHUN stands in a suit and tie. RALPH, in his *hanbok*, sits with ESTHER and MARY at the dining-room table, each with a small cup. A birthday cake, plates, dishes, and a bottle of soju."⁸² In this scene, he also speaks about his unsuccessful first cycle of life.

CHUN: I was not allowed *hwangap janche* in Korea. My brother tells me I cannot have *janche* without wife, without children, in Korea I cannot stand up and say I lived a life when was fill so full of shame. [...] But

⁸² Suh, *American Hwangap*, 135.

when you are sixty you can have much bigger party than what I have now. I want you each of you children when you are sixty to stand in real your home, with family you desire, to look back on sixty years you lived and feel proud, okay? Not like me.⁸³

Min Suk's family-only *hwangap janchi* suggests that his American dream in the United States was not successful in his first cycle of life. Jeffrey Santa Ana examines the "media's imaging of happiness, optimism, anxiety, and fear in the depiction of Asians as figures of economic opportunity and threat," arguing that "Asian America's importance [is] in the making of a capitalist culture of emotions—a culture producing and maintaining the ideals of liberal personhood and individualism."⁸⁴ In this culture of reinforcing the ideas of liberal personhood and individualism in the United States, the concept of the American dream has been fed to immigrants by the narratives of upward mobility and materialistic prosperity constructed to be the "true" standards of happiness. The compulsory pursuit of happiness rooted in the capitalistic rhetoric of the American dream is to obtain material comfort and gain shelter from destitution and unpredictability; happiness is thus a feeling that is, in Santa Ana's words, "compressed with the cultural meanings and social relationships of belonging as both a person and an individual."⁸⁵ When the first cycle of Min Suk's life derailed from the proper track of the American

⁸³ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 135.

⁸⁴ Jeffrey Santa Ana, *Racial Feelings: Asian America in a Capitalist Culture of Emotion* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2015), 6.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

dream, he abandoned his life in America and ran away to Korea, but even there he was unable to find meaning or a sense of belonging.

For this *hwangap* celebration, not only does Min Suk encroach upon the home physically but he also infringes emotionally on the lives of his family members, trying very hard to re-connect with his daughter Esther and elder son David. Min Suk's Koreanness estranges the logic of conversation with his broken English ("because when you said to me this is not my home. Yes. But I have a plan")⁸⁶ and his non sequiturs ("you know Kim Jong Il? [...] He has nuclear weapon now [...] Is unexpected situation");⁸⁷ however, it is Min Suk's "performance" of this Koreanness as a "non-assimilating" stranger that infringes on space. In the diner scene with Esther and Min Suk, the view from the window booth where they are sitting gives out on the Texan mountains and desert; Min Suk's talk of the North Korean leader and South Korean mountains jars with the landscape of the American West, especially when he insists to Esther that he used to be a cowboy and that he now plans to "relearn cowboy way."⁸⁸ Inside Mary's house, he is the only one (aside from Mary) who gets to be in both levels of the house: the basement and the ground floor. He even takes over the tree in the garden when he climbs it drunk. There is also a scene with him and Ralph fishing in a boat on a lake—an important location, as it is the first and only time we see Ralph outside his mother's home. In whichever location Min Suk finds himself, his presence does not seem to fit; and yet, he still attempts to integrate himself into the surroundings. Even though at

⁸⁶ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 143.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 95-96.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

the end of the play there is a glimmer of hope for Min Suk in that he plans to stay in Mary's house (albeit living in the basement as a starting point), he nevertheless remains a diasporic figure whose "home" is in constant flux between the intersections of nations, histories, cultures, languages, family identities, spaces, and belonging.

The intersection between the Korean American family and the history of twentieth-century Korea is imagined spatially in *American Hwangap*. Esther Kim Lee introduces Suh's play in her anthology, explaining that this play was "inspired by two anniversaries, the sixtieth birthday of Suh's father and the sixtieth anniversary of Korea's independence from Japan, which for Suh, symbolically represents another sort of *hwangap*."⁸⁹ In Min Suk's valedictory speech scene, he says: "You know I was born sixty years ago. Same also is Korea. This is year of Korean independence, so like me these are countries sixty years old, one whole lifetime. And same as with me this country was create division within itself, broken to two separate countries in which family was divided."⁹⁰ Lee explains that "*American Hwangap* is primarily about the human experience in the most intimate sense, but it also reflects Suh's thoughts on Korea's fractured history."⁹¹ The spatial imagination of Korea's division derived from "Korea's fractured history" is staged in Scene 17, set outside the house. After his *hwangap* celebration, a drunken Min Suk has climbed a tree, and Mary stands under it. Their

⁸⁹ *American Hwangap* is set in 2005, and Korea's independence from Japan was in 1945. See Esther Kim Lee, introduction to *American Hwangap* in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, 85.

⁹⁰ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 135.

⁹¹ Lee, introduction to *American Hwangap*, 85.

vertical position represents the geographical relationship between North Korea and South Korea, a remnant of Korea's ongoing history of separation since independence. Telling Mary that "because sixty years is rebirth, when Zodiac ends is a baby born anew,"⁹² Min Suk remarks that he is reborn and proposes to Mary by giving her a ring. In this scene, the Chun family's incomplete reconciliation echoes the unachieved reunification between North and South Korea. Hope for two separate Koreas and for the Chun family, particularly with Mary, is expressed through Min Suk's statement that he is reborn and, as a baby, can once again restart his life.

Lloyd Suh in an interview states that "being the children of immigrants [in the United States] is about becoming a promise of the sense of diasporic hope. Your parents moved for opportunities and their children are capable of things that they might not even be able to imagine."⁹³ This sense of optimism and hope is clearly expressed by the last scene in which Min Suk and Ralph are in the basement: Suh describes this as the "promise of the sense of diasporic hope."⁹⁴ Ralph—a jobless permanent resident in the basement of his mother's house—embodies not only the failure to become a model minority, but also the possibility of becoming a hopeful future for the Chun family. Min Suk tells his son that he plans to live in the basement and work his way up to Mary's room, so he wants him to move out of the basement. Surprisingly, Ralph readily agrees,

⁹² Suh, *American Hwangap*, 142.

⁹³ Claire Lee, "Korean-American playwright brings unusual portrait of immigrant family," *Korea Herald*, April 2, 2012, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20120402001110>.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

saying that some musician friends have a house down the block and told him he could live with them anytime he wanted. Mary's plan to bring Min Suk back home has worked out very well, then. The *hwangap* event in the play—even though a failure if considered by the Korean standards of the celebration—becomes a success in that it brings hope through the renewal of relationships. Thanks to their long talks on the phone, Esther and David rediscover the closeness they once had, and David invites Esther to New York. Mary, although very much entrenched as the leader of the household and taking pride in her independence, still finds enjoyment in traditions and in the possible rekindling of her relationship to this sixty-year-old prodigal man whom she once truly loved and, even now after all these years, still does. Ralph and Min Suk find hope in their bonding and in a new direction for their lives: Min Suk, as he returns to the womblike basement where he plans to rejuvenate his relationship with Mary and thus his own life as well, and Ralph as he finally comes out from his cave and attempts independence. The cartography of the Chun household has changed. At the very end, Ralph, whose family members throughout the play didn't care to listen to him play guitar, finally plays for his father who listens attentively and, as the stage directions state, "starts to hum, maybe sing along, or clap in a steady rhythm. RALPH's playing might not be skilled, but it might be beautiful."⁹⁵ The *hwangap* event of celebrating Min Suk's sixtieth birthday leads him and his family to a hopeful transformation for a future waiting to restart in America.

⁹⁵ Suh, *American Hwangap*, 150.

Survival for Everyone in Diana Son's *Satellites*

Diana Son is a New York City-based playwright whose first play, *Wrecked on Brecht*, was produced at Café La MaMa in New York City in 1987. *Stealing Fire*, based on the Procne and Philomela myth, was first produced at SoHo Rep in New York City in 1992. *Joyless Bad Luck Club* was presented as part of *Home* for Contemporary Theatre at HERE in New York City in 1993. *R.A.W. ('Cause I'm a Woman)* is a one-act play which was first produced at the Public Theater in 1993 and published in the anthology *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color*.⁹⁶ *2000 Miles* is a one-act play produced at the No Pants Theatre Company and the Ensemble Studio Theatre in New York City in 1993. *Boy* premiered at La Jolla Playhouse in Los Angeles in 1996 and was first published in the anthology *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*. *Fishes* was produced at New Georges in New York City and at People's Light and Theater Company in Philadelphia, both in 1998. Son's 1998 full-length play, *Stop Kiss*, was a huge hit and one of the longest running plays (nearly four months) at the Public Theater. For *Stop Kiss*, Son was awarded the 1999 GLAAD (Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation) Media Award for Outstanding New York Theatre Production on Broadway or Off-Broadway. *Happy Birthday Jack* is a one-act play, first staged at the 23rd Humana Festival of New American Plays, Actors Theatre of Louisville in 1999. Son wrote several short plays including *Siberia* (2003), *Blind Date* (2011), *Axis* (2012), and *The Moon*

⁹⁶ Kathy A. Perkins and Roberta Uno, eds. *Contemporary Plays by Women of Color* (London: Routledge, 1996).

Please (2013).⁹⁷ Son also worked as a writer on television series such as NBC's *Law and Order: Criminal Intent*, TNT's *South Land*, CBS's *Blue Bloods*, ABC's *American Crime* and the 1999 NBC hit *West Wing*.⁹⁸

Satellites was her "come-back home" play to the Public Theater in 2006 after the long pause in her professional theater career since the great success of *Stop Kiss*. *Satellites* points up several cultural differences by placing a middle-class mixed couple in a predominately black neighborhood in Brooklyn, New York. The play is about Nina, a woman of Korean descent, and her African American husband Miles, who was adopted by a white family; this interracial couple have a newly-born baby girl, Hannah. They have just moved into a new home/office in Brooklyn, where spatial transformation based

⁹⁷ See *Asian American Playwrights: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 324-6; See also "Diana Son," *Doollee The Playwrights Database*, accessed February 7, 2017, <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsS/son-diana.html#91739>.

⁹⁸ Son has been the recipient of a National Endowment of the Arts/Theatre Communications Group Residency grant at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles and a Brooks Atkinson Fellowship at the Royal National Theatre in London. Since 2015, Son has been the Playwriting Program Co-Chair of the Dramatists Guild of America's Fellows Program, a mentorship and support program for playwrights and musical theater writers. She has received numerous awards including the Berilla Kerr Award for Playwriting. See Julie Young, "Just A Nice Korean Girl From Delaware," *Korean American Story*, January 3, 2011, <http://koreanamericanstory.org/profile-of-diana-son-by-julie-young/>.

on a strategy of gentrification has been in full force in the neighborhood where the couple purchased a house.

Although Son does not find a significant meaning in classifying a writer by ethnicity and recognizes the label of “Asian American playwright” as restrictive, she answered an interview question about how far Asian American theatre has come stating “we have a tradition to respond to. The earlier generation, like David Henry Hwang, Philip Gotanda, Jessica Hagedorn, felt the responsibility to first present images of Asian Americans and say ‘we are here.’ And I think it is my generation who’s going to say, ‘we are weird.’”⁹⁹ Son illustrates the unique Asian American experience through *Satellites* by dealing with Korean American culture and identity within the diversity of people in an urban household setting.¹⁰⁰

Son asserts that *Satellites* is “not autobiographical, despite the many superficial similarities.”¹⁰¹ She later clarifies that the non-autobiographical story does resemble her

⁹⁹ Interview with Diana Son, “The Verbal Mural,” in *Tokens? The NYC Asian American Experience on Stage*, ed. Alvin Eng (New York: The Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 1999), 415.

¹⁰⁰ Esther Kim Lee identifies *Satellites* as “Son’s most direct commentary on Korean American identity and culture.” See introduction to *Satellites* in *Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, 247.

¹⁰¹ Jason Zinoman, “Candor as a Cure for Writer’s Block,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/18/theater/18zino.html>.

life trajectory, stating “I did envision Nina as having a similar upbringing as mine.”¹⁰²

Son and her character Nina share similarities: Son’s parents are South Korean immigrants to the U.S.; Son’s mother is deceased; Son and the fictional Nina are both Korean Americans with a child, part of an interracial marriage (although Son’s husband is white); her husband works in the computer industry (although, unlike Miles in the play, he wasn’t unemployed); and they, too, moved to Brooklyn. Discussing her growing interest in her roots since her pregnancy, she states “my husband is Caucasian, and when you’re pregnant, you start wondering what your kid is going to look like [...] I found myself hoping that my child would have slanty eyes. That really surprised me.”¹⁰³

Esther Kim Lee conceptualizes Son’s *Satellites* as an identity play along with two other plays by Korean American women playwrights.¹⁰⁴ For Lee, the three plays reveal the playwrights’ refutation of the expectations and boundaries set on their identity as Asian Americans and as women. Lee further states that the playwrights “open up

¹⁰² Diana Son, “Author’s Statement,” *Version 3.0: Contemporary Asian American Plays*, 397.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Two other playwrights are Julia Cho (*99 Histories*), and Young Jean Lee (*Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*). See Esther Kim Lee, “Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play: Staging Heterotopic Subjectivities,” in *Contemporary Women Playwrights: into the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Penny Farfan and Lesley Ferris (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 244-257.

possibilities for more complex understandings of identity by using the space of the stage to blur, shatter, and invert their ontological subjectivity.”¹⁰⁵

Son’s depiction of an interracial marriage in *Satellites* continues the dramatization of race, gender, and sexuality that she developed in previous works: *R.A.W. ('Cause I'm a Woman)* was about Asian American women’s reactions to the racialized and gendered stereotypes of geishas, exotic mistresses, and *Miss Saigon*-like characters. *Boy* deals with the construction of sexual identity along with family relationships; *Stop Kiss* explores female friendship and lesbian relationship as a confrontation with a homophobic society. Discussing Son’s major works and themes, Esther S. Kim (Esther Kim Lee) states “although her plays cannot be categorized singularly as ‘feminist,’ most of them address women’s issues, including mother-daughter relationships, sisterhood, and gender discrimination.”¹⁰⁶ While *Satellites* does not solely classify as a “feminist” play, the work does vividly lay out feminist concerns of race, class, gender, and parenthood pertaining to an Afro-Asian interracial couple in North American urban spaces. In particular, the issue of race as a theme came about after Son learned that many productions of *Stop Kiss* had cast white actresses for the lead character—unlike the premiere with Asian American actress Sandra Oh. Son then decided to write a race-specific play, *Satellites*.¹⁰⁷

The significance of “Satellites” as a title becomes apparent when we realize that although Nina and Miles are the main characters in the play, Hannah is actually the focus

¹⁰⁵ Lee, “Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play,” 255.

¹⁰⁶ Kim, “Diana Son,” 323.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 396.

of the story. Just as satellites are both natural bodies and man-made objects that orbit another body, as such in the play all the characters—as well as all the issues—orbit around Hannah. At the center of *Satellites* are the constant interruptions that Nina, the Korean American mother, faces in the course of mothering Hannah. In the beginning of the play, in Scene 2, a rock is thrown and breaks the large living-room window of Nina and Miles's new home. This sudden interruption, this physical breaking of the space, starts a series of intrusions into Nina's personal space. These disruptions shake her sense of security in her career, relationship, identity, and motherhood. Nina's everyday life is highly stressed by the needs of her newborn, Hannah; by Miles's current unemployed status; by a struggling freelance architecture venture with her female friend and co-worker, Kit; and by the financial burden of the recently purchased house which is still under construction. Nina's life is frequently disrupted by all the "insider" characters, but especially by "outsiders": a friendly yet semi-shady African American neighbor, Reggie; Miles's adoptive Caucasian brother Eric; the upstairs renter, Walter; and the Korean nanny, Mrs. Chae.

When Reggie, who has lived in the neighborhood since birth, appears and offers to get the window replaced, Miles is suspicious of him, but Nina gladly accepts his help. Reggie quickly becomes a regular visitor, always helping with some service or purchase he offers at better prices thanks to his long-time neighborhood contacts. Although Miles accepts his help, he still views Reggie as an intruder, even at one point suspecting that he's a thief and setting up a hidden webcam to get proof. Miles's brother, Eric, appears at the house, having just returned from a trip in Asia. His presence is welcomed by Miles, but as he encroaches on Miles's and Nina's life, Nina starts to resent him. Eric gets Miles

interested in his far-fetched entrepreneurial dreams. Hoping to get the renter evicted in order to take over the upstairs room, Eric tells them a substantial amount of cash he brought back from Asia is missing and that he suspects Walter of having stolen it. Nina spends her time being overprotective of her daughter, Hannah, compensating for Miles's refusal to cradle Hannah, as he claims she cries even more when he holds her. His reticence to be a nurturing father and his distance toward Nina create more tension between them. Kit patiently takes up the slack from Nina's workload but starts to feel overwhelmed by Nina's obsessive behavior toward Hannah and her transitional life in general. Nina hires a Korean nanny, Mrs. Chae, to take care of Hannah; but after some time, Nina starts to view Mrs. Chae differently, especially her "proper" role in the family space.

In Scene 8, Mrs. Chae appears in Nina's home office offering two bowls of the Korean dish called *mi-yuk-guk* (미역국), a seaweed soup, for Nina and Kit. Mrs. Chae mentions *paek il* (백일).

MRS. CHAE: Soon it will be Hannah's *paek il*. We must have a big party.

NINA: *Paek il*? What's that?

MRS. CHAE: *Paek il* is for one hundredth day because back in old times, when a baby did not die by one hundred days, we have a big party.

We say now she will live long life.¹⁰⁸

The baby's family would hang a special straw rope on the main gate of the house to ward off evil spirits after the birth of the baby. This ritualistic installation signaled that they

¹⁰⁸ Son, *Satellites in Seven Contemporary Plays from the Korean Diaspora in the Americas*, 292.

had a newborn baby so that people should not visit the house.¹⁰⁹ The *paek il* event is the first official activity of the family after lifting the ban on entering the house to celebrate the birth of the baby and wish it a long healthy and wealthy life. The family then prepares a *paek il janchi* (백일 잔치), a ceremonial event that includes various types of food for family, relatives, and neighbors.¹¹⁰ This festive moment celebrates the baby's one-hundred-day survival.

Later, in the same scene, tension rises between Nina and Mrs. Chae, because Mrs. Chae hesitates at Kit's suggestion that Mrs. Chae's grandson and Hannah could have a play date. Since Hannah is a mixed race baby, Nina immediately assumes that Mrs. Chae's hesitation is a sign of racism: "What—you're afraid that your daughter won't let him come because Hannah's black?" When Mrs. Chae matter-of-factly replies: "Hannah is not black. If you look at her maybe you cannot tell. People cannot tell the daddy is black. She is just beautiful baby."¹¹¹ Nina becomes terribly upset but does not answer, because Miles interrupts by intruding in the home office. At the end of the scene, Nina tells Kit to throw away the soup that Mrs. Chae had prepared for her. This action

¹⁰⁹ This straw rope is called *geum-jul* (금줄). It is usually knitted with pieces of charcoal which Korean people believe cleanse and block evil spirits. If a newly born baby is male, then pepper is added to the charcoal rope; if female, then small pine branches are added to the charcoal rope.

¹¹⁰ Nowadays, Korean people celebrate *paek il* in a smaller scale just with family members and/or close friends of the baby's parents but have a sizable birthday party for the baby's first birthday called *dol* (돌).

¹¹¹ Son, *Satellites*, 294.

symbolizes her defiance against Mrs. Chae's Koreanness which, for Nina, is racially biased against Blackness. In Scene 10, Nina declares to Kit that she is going to fire Mrs. Chae, stating: "I'll take anyone who isn't going to poison my baby with racist thoughts."¹¹² She sums up the situation that she is currently facing in Brooklyn, in a new house, and in her new relationships, when she breaks down and tells Kit that the reason Miles and she moved to a black neighborhood was the same reason she hired a Korean nanny, so that Hannah would be proud to be Korean and proud to be African American. In the last scene, as Mrs. Chae tries to save her job, we find out why she hesitated when Kit suggested that her grandson and Hannah should have a play date. Mrs. Chae's daughter forbade her to take care of her grandchild because she is ashamed of Mrs. Chae's poor English and doesn't want her son to grow up speaking broken English. Mrs. Chae's daughter hired two nannies to take care of her child: a British nanny during the day and a Tibetan nanny on the weekends. Mrs. Chae has basically been banished from her daughter's house and is thus unable to bring her grandchild on a play date, but Nina's anger is still so strongly linked to the racial issue that she verbally attacks Mrs. Chae. Barely containing her rage, Nina asserts that Koreans like Mrs. Chae who came to the U.S. in the 1960s were taunted by white people who called them "gook, chink, chingaling," and that when they were beaten and their stores were vandalized they "went looking for someone you could feel superior to. And you picked black people."¹¹³ Even though Mrs. Chae was hired by Nina, it is Mrs. Chae's Koreanness that Nina eventually judges to be severely intrusive and is, in fact, the catalyst for Nina's breakdown.

¹¹² Son, *Satellites*, 303.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 314.

On stage, various spaces are clearly defined as psycho-social zones that are manifestations of the boundaries of Nina's thoughts and perceptions of Koreanness as represented by Mrs. Chae. While Nina is the owner of the house, significantly, only Mrs. Chae, (like Min Suk in *American Hwangap*), is seen in all levels of the house, both the main floor and the ground-floor home office. There are no scenes located in the upstairs bedrooms, but there is a flight of stairs from which Mrs. Chae does appear with Hannah. Mrs. Chae is everywhere, always holding Hannah and speaking Korean to her, suggesting the Korean one hundred-day celebration, and even calling herself *halmoni* (할머니), grandmother in Korean, when speaking to Hannah—a word that Nina recognizes and one to which she strongly objects. To Nina, the worst part of this embodied Koreanness is the (misguided) belief there has been a racist invasion of her house which brings out her view of anti-African American racism by Koreans in the U.S.: “It makes me mad, it makes me ashamed of being Korean, fucking racists.”¹¹⁴ This outburst is a major plot point of the play that reveals how much Nina has repressed her hatred of racial discrimination and how much she fears that Hannah will also suffer from it. Mrs. Chae is significant as the trigger that will divulge the deep-rooted source of Nina's pent-up rage about race and her almost constant anger throughout the play; Nina's eruption is also the start of her final and loving understanding of her relationship with Miles and Hannah.

In her author's statement for *Satellites*, Diana Son, remembering her middle-class bi-racial hometown, expresses the ethnic isolation she felt in that town as part of a Korean family caught in between black and white: “we were the only Korean family

¹¹⁴ Son, *Satellites*, 314.

around and my parents were fierce assimilators.”¹¹⁵ She also remembers that “it wasn’t paradise but it was sweet and I never, ever, thought about, heard of or experienced any Korean vs. African American tension.”¹¹⁶ Later in her life Son would encounter violence between Koreans and African Americans, in the form of the constantly mediatized images of the 1992 Los Angeles riots.¹¹⁷ These started on April 29, after the jury in the Rodney King assault case acquitted all four accused Los Angeles Police Department officers of the brutal beating of King, an African American motorist.¹¹⁸ Approximately two hours later, in the South-Central L.A. neighborhood, police responded to motorists being attacked with beer cans. A Caucasian truck driver, Reginald Kelly, was dragged out of his truck and beaten on the street. Protests erupted outside police headquarters as well as violence in the streets. Looters destroyed storefronts and fires were set in many buildings. During the next six days, violence spread throughout the Los Angeles

¹¹⁵ Son, “Author’s Statement,” 394.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 395.

¹¹⁷ Even before the riots, tension between African American and Korean American communities were running high. One year prior to the riots, Soon Ja Du, a female Korean American store owner shot and killed Latasha Harlins, a fifteen-year-old African American girl, after a heated argument in the store. The judge gave a light sentence to the Korean American woman with no prison term. See Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 183-4.

¹¹⁸ “The L.A. Riots: 24 Years Later,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2016, <http://timelines.latimes.com/los-angeles-riots/>.

metropolitan area.¹¹⁹ In the aftermath, Korean American shop owners suffered the most as their businesses, which had been perceived as intruding on African American ethnic enclaves in search of inexpensive rents, were targeted due to deteriorating relations between African Americans and Korean Americans and to the fact that repeated calls for help to police by Korean Americans had been ignored.¹²⁰ As Nancy Abelmann and John Lie note the bleak ideology reinforcing the “black-Korean conflict” as a portrayal of two antithetical minority groups, they argue that “these two portraits constitute flip sides of the same ideological coin, which presumes that the United States is an open society with no systematic barriers to success. [...] The ideological construction and constitution of the ‘black-Korean conflict’ should alert us to the dangers of emphasizing this interethnic conflict.”¹²¹

Although there is a fourteen-year gap between the 1992 L.A. riots and the 2006 premiere of *Satellites*, the riots had a powerful impact on Son. She recalls that period, and discusses the news media coverage of the severe conflict between Korean Americans and African Americans:

¹¹⁹ “The L.A. Riots: 24 Years Later.”

¹²⁰ Karen Grigsby Bates, “How Koreatown Rose from the Ashes of L.A. Riots,” *All Things Considered*, April 27, 2012, NPR.org, <http://www.npr.org/2012/04/27/151524921/how-koreatown-rose-from-the-ashes-of-l-a-riots>.

¹²¹ Nancy Abelmann and John Lie, *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 149.

What I remember is seeing images on the news of angry African Americans clashing with angry Korean Americans, sometimes violently, sometimes fatally, and hearing voices on both sides articulating painful and ugly stereotypes and accusations which would leave me feeling a jumble of emotion that is best characterized as anguish. This subject was and continues to be one that is very, very painful to me.¹²²

In *Satellites*, home becomes a reflection of socio-political debate over the interracial relationship between Korean Americans and African Americans in the United States.¹²³ The play reflects home as Chandra Talpade Mohanty describes it, “not as a comfortable, stable, inherited and familiar space, but instead as an imaginative, politically charged space where the familiarity and sense of affection and commitment lay in a shared collective analysis of social injustice, as well as a vision of radical transformation.”¹²⁴

¹²² Son, “Author’s Statement,” 395.

¹²³ *Satellites* is included in a Post-Black play anthology by the editors who placed it in a chapter about plays portraying Blackness written by non-Black playwrights. Young Jean Lee is the other Korean American playwright featured in the chapter of this anthology with her play, *The Shipment*. See Harry Justin Elam, Jr. and Douglas A. Jones, Jr, eds. *The Methuen Drama Book of Post-Black Plays* (London: Methuen Drama, 2012).

¹²⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Defining Genealogies: Feminist Reflections on Being South Asian in North America,” in *Making More Waves: New Writing by Asian American Women*, eds. Elaine H. Kim, Lilia V. Villanueva, and Asian Women United of California (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 121.

In the play, Nina and Miles's new space echoes the idea of this radical transformation in their unfinished, unstable home, which evokes vivid national memories of a U.S. historical moment: the 1992 L.A. riots. Indeed, the L.A. riots are never mentioned in *Satellites* (though at one point Reggie very briefly refers to the 1977 New York City blackout riots), but the breaking of the window of Nina and Miles's living room at the beginning of the play triggers images of shattered Los Angeles storefront windows during the riots.¹²⁵ This is also a literal shattering of any sense of stability, boundary and safety of the demarcated space of their home. The play never reveals who actually threw the rock that broke the window (Miles even surmises that maybe Reggie himself threw it to get himself hired to replace the glass) but, in any event, it is a sign usually associated with singling out people and warning them to leave. In the last scene, Nina's line about stores being vandalized and her harsh characterizing of Koreans as racists who chose black people to feel superior to also feels very much like another reference to the Los Angeles upheaval. Because Miles is African American and Nina is Korean American (and Hannah is a mixed baby), they represent race relations that have historically been marginalized but can be seen as central to, and an important dimension of, the Black-and-Korean conflict. Reggie mentions how he was born in the same house he lives in, on the same block, at a time when the entire neighborhood was African American; but now a

¹²⁵ There are multiple artistic explorations reframing tragic incidents of the L.A. riots in theater, TV, and film. For example, the character of a Korean Canadian grocery shop owner in Ins Choi's play *Kim's Convenience* soliloquizes about the L.A. riots. Recent films retelling the L.A. riots include *K-Town 92* (2017) by Grace Lee and *Gook* (2017) by Justin Chon, among others.

gay couple bought a house in the same street. The neighborhood is gentrifying and all of the new (non-black) people can be seen as intruders—just like Korean Americans were perceived to be when they moved into the South-Central Los Angeles area.

After Nina finishes her anti-Korean tirade and blames Miles for their financial burden and the fact that he doesn't show outward signs of affection for their daughter, she destroys what is left of the already half-broken window in their living room. The final scene of this play is surprisingly sudden but signifies the resolution of the race relations and family struggles over the baby between Nina and Miles. Lee interprets Nina's destructive act by stating that "the brownstone literally and figuratively shifts under the characters' feet, but the playwright's main character finds herself by shattering a window to connect to another space."¹²⁶ This act of shattering the architecture conveys the message that regeneration comes about only after destruction. Nina's hope is to rebuild the relationships around her and connect to another world outside of her private space, marking a new start specifically for her newborn baby. The shattering noise triggers Hanna's crying. Both Nina and Mrs. Chae respond to the sound but Nina stops her. As Nina reaches the stairs, Miles comes down cradling and soothing Hannah by singing a lullaby, and is joined by Nina. With the final portrait of a mother, father, and child, Mrs. Chae, as the Korean intruding element, is finally set in her position inside the home, but outside of the family unit. After its climactic moment, *Satellites* shows that though the house/home has been shattered, it can be fixed by love and caring. For Son, there is room for everybody's survival with a hopeful future, at least, in *Satellites'* Brooklyn.

¹²⁶ Lee, "Asian American Women Playwrights and the Dilemma of the Identity Play," 255.

Recipe for a Last Supper in Julia Cho's *Aubergine*

Aubergine is playwright Julia Cho's 2016 play; it won the Will Glickman Award in 2017.¹²⁷ This play tells the story of a Korean American family's raw and unspoken memories that have ripened and are ready to be digested. The play was originally written as a short piece for Berkeley Repertory Theatre's 2012 Ground Floor incubator program. Cho was commissioned, along with sixteen other playwrights, to write short plays about food. Cho based her play in part on her own experiences of both her father's and a close friend's death; the work became a meditation on grief and death. She later extended the work into a full-length play that was first performed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in March 2016 and opened in New York City in September 2016 at Playwrights Horizons. In Seoul, the Korean National Theater staged the play both in June and July 2017 and in February and March 2018. *Aubergine* won the Korean 54th Dong-A Theatre Award.

In a number of her previous plays Cho dealt with diasporic and dysfunctional family experiences and the intense narration and imagination of their memories.¹²⁸ 99

¹²⁷ Lily Janiak, "Julia Cho's 'Aubergine' wins 2017 Glickman Award," *SFGate*, January 13, 2017, <http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/Julia-Cho-s-Aubergine-wins-2017-Glickman-10855839.php>.

¹²⁸ Julia Cho is the recipient of many awards including the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, the Barrie Stavis Award, the Claire Tow Award for Emerging Artists, and the L. Arnold Weissberger Award. Her play *Durango* was honored by Entertainment Weekly as one of the Top 10 Plays of 2006 and one of the Best of 2007 by the *Los Angeles Times*. From Julia Cho biography, *New Dramatists*, accessed March 25, 2018, <http://newdramatists.org/julia-cho>.

Histories (2002) is about a Korean mother/daughter relationship and how they reexamine their forgotten and hidden past. In *BFE* (2003), Cho focuses on the story of an unstable Asian mother whose daughter is kidnapped in the Southwest. *The Architecture of Loss* (2004) presents an interracial family, showing the rapport between a Korean wife and mother and an American husband and father. In *Durango* (2006), a Korean father/son relationship is the central subject of the story in which the father insists on taking a road trip to Durango, Colorado, but winds up in the wrong place with the same name.

Aubergine can be seen as a ritual for the main character's father, whose terminal illness has left him on the margin between life and death. Memories are unwrapped by each of the four characters—Ray, Ray's uncle, Cornelia, and Lucien—through their relationship with food. The fifth character is the father, who is dying of cirrhosis of the liver and is comatose throughout the play except for a few flashback scenes. The silent and immobile father is the central figure of the story on a powerfully existential level that is also visually represented by his physical location in the middle of the stage throughout almost the entire play. One by one, four of the characters deal with the dying man through their own personal relationship with food and family. A sixth person, Diane, is never in direct contact with the father or any of the other characters, except at the very end of the play. The act of sharing memories about food becomes a transformative force blurring the rigid line between an everyday ritual of preparing and sharing food and the ritual of preparing for and living with death. Sharing memories thus reconfigure the demarcations between life/death, father/son, Korean/American, past/present, and love/hate relationships.

The story revolves around Ray, a Korean American chef, who responds to his father's terminal state through memories about food related to his father, a man who never understood his passion for—and career in—food. Ray is challenged by his uncle, who has just arrived from Korea and does not speak English at all: he confronts Ray about the role of food, especially about his brother's (Ray's father) very last meal. Ray has to deal with this Korean man's insistence that he should prepare turtle soup from the small live tortoise he himself has brought in order to make Ray's father well again. The more time Ray spends with this uncle, the more he becomes conscious of his cultural entanglement, the personal history of his family, and his father and mother. Cornelia, Ray's ex-girlfriend who can speak Korean, acts as interpreter for the two men, Ray and Ray's uncle, not only moderating their conversations but also trying to channel the sometimes confusing and conflicting cultural and generational differences. Cornelia also shares her memory of her own father, her remembrance of him specifically tied to mulberries, which are also directly related to her relationship with Ray. Diane talks directly to the audience at length in a prologue that reveals her and her husband's obsession with food and recalls the memory of her terminally ill father preparing a pastrami sandwich that he shared with her not long before he died. Diane reappears at the end of the play, being surprised by, and surprising the audience with, the unbelievably delicious pastrami sandwich that Ray has prepared for her in the new restaurant that he and Cornelia own. Lucien—another non-Korean or Korean American character—is a refugee camp survivor, who now works in the U.S. as a hospice caregiver and who takes care of Ray's dying father at his house. He also shares his own memories about food and, more precisely, the lack of food he and others suffered as refugees. Throughout the play,

Lucien teaches Ray about aspects of food as sustenance. He offers critical but practical insights on death to Ray in order to help him deal with the inevitable: “knowing where a loved one will die, knowing how [...] this is a gift.”¹²⁹ At one point in the play, Lucien gives Ray an eggplant—the oversized American type, very different from the smaller variety favored in his native land—which he prefers to call by its French name, aubergine.

Julia Cho reveals the complexity of emotional relationships with food including the diverse food-related activities of cooking, feeding, and eating. The complex emotions around food are reflected in the intergenerational conflict between father and son in this Korean American family. Ray has studied culinary arts and spent an internship in France; he has thus, presumably, eschewed all simple forms of meals in order to become a master chef. This is something that his father does not and cannot understand: “the man hates my cooking,” Ray says. “He hates it. The fact of it. It’s women’s work, it’s low class, it’s uneducated.”¹³⁰ He also tells us that his father has always preferred cheap ramen and American fast foods, recalling the day he prepared an eighteen-course tasting dinner for his father in order to gain his respect and impress him with the skills he learned. The only response his father had for Ray, after tasting his fine gourmet cuisine, was the single word, “interesting,” which he repeated in between each one of the eighteen dishes. But for Ray, the most devastating part of that event was when, later that same night, he found his father in the kitchen eating a bowl of instant ramen.

¹²⁹ Julia Cho, *Aubergine* (Hanover: Smith and Kraus Publishers, Inc., 2016), 63.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

Ray's memories of food are directly tied to his anger toward his father. One particularly bitter memory is the flashback scene in which Ray's father is physically up and about. Ray recalls how, when he was once preparing a meal, his father burst into the kitchen brandishing his credit card statement. He yelled at Ray asking him to explain the huge amount charged on his credit card—which was to be used only in case of emergency. Ray told him that he purchased a highly prized special kitchen knife. His father erupted into a rage. When Ray told him “it’s my *livelihood*. It’s the *one* tool I need, the *one* tool,” his father yelled back at him: “so go to supermarket, one knife is ten dollars!”¹³¹ Then, in a powerful moment revealing tyrannical paternal authority, Ray’s father demanded to be paid back immediately. Ray gave him the little cash he had on him. Upon his father’s order, he also gave up his credit card, which Ray’s father placed on the kitchen table and hacked in half using Ray’s special knife. In this bitter flashback, Cho does not romanticize Ray’s remembrance of his father as something sweet or nostalgic. Instead, she dramatizes the complex emotional configuration of memories embedded in Ray’s unsettling discord with his father. As harsh as these memories are for Ray, his present time is even worse, as his ability to be a master chef is rendered irrelevant since his comatose father cannot eat anything that he prepares for him. The very essence of Ray’s life, food and cooking, is useless; he has become powerless and can no longer take action. All he can do now is to reminisce, and he finds himself fluctuating between present and past.

Only toward the end of the play does Ray reconcile with his father—albeit after his death—through the reenactment of one of his father’s memories about eating. Ray

¹³¹ Cho, *Aubergine*, 50.

recounts that his father once told him that when he was a poor young student in Korea, he used to eat alone in his small rented room. One day, he decided to put a mirror in front of the table so that he could give the impression that he was not dining alone. After watching himself in the mirror eating, breathing, thinking, and talking to himself night after night, he suddenly saw something that changed him, but he never told Ray what that was. The day of his father's funeral, Ray put on his father's old jacket. As he looked at himself in the mirror, he saw what his father had seen: his own death. Ray recalls his father's words: "even though we are alive, we're already in some respect dead. Even in the daily movements of life we're already in our graves. That's what my father was trying to tell me. You are always already dead. So why not live?"¹³² This particular philosophical view reveals the liminal presence of death within life and the past within present by showing the mirrored image of Ray and his father as if they watch each other's reflection eating together at the small table.

Ray's uncle—his father's only brother, who complicates memories from the moment of his arrival—shares his particular memory of food related to his dying brother as he talks about *mu-guk* (무국), a traditional Korean soup with radish which is one of the plain soups made in Korean kitchens. Disclosing the Korean cooking-related concept of *sohn-mat* (손맛), he tells the story of when their mother made this soup for Ray's father before he went off on a long journey, hoping that the soup would be so good that he would stay. The Korean word *sohn-mat* means a special cooking skill that is innate, neither learned nor measured, for making delicious dishes. This term often refers to a cooking person's loving care as he or she prepares food that can make the person who is

¹³² Cho, *Aubergine*, 88.

eating it feel his or her warmth and affection. Ray's uncle tells Ray that he inherited the magical cooking skills—this Korean concept of *sohn-mat*—from his grandmother and that Ray is such a great chef that he too can cook such a wonderful meal for his ill father that “this time we won't let him go. This time we will make him stay.”¹³³ Ray and his uncle have a hard time reaching an agreement over a last supper for Ray's father. Ray's uncle insists that Ray kill and cook the live turtle he has brought for his brother, convinced that fresh turtle soup will give his brother strength and bring him out of his coma. For Ray's uncle, this sacrificial food ritual must be performed. The act of cooking in the presence of death highlights the ritualistic aspect of *Aubergine*. Cho's play depicts the affective dimensions of food and especially its inherent cruelty. There is, for example, Ray's undeniable discomfort about killing and cooking something that is alive—a shock and discomfort that is reflected in the reaction of the play's spectators when Ray reads aloud the particularly gruesome instructions on how to kill and prepare a live turtle (which the audience can see is helplessly wriggling on its back atop the kitchen counter). The revelation that this live turtle needs to be sacrificed temporarily situates Ray's position in between that of chef and shaman. This revelation plays with Ray's emotional state—as well as that of the spectators in the theater—for Cho does not reveal the fate of the turtle until the very last scene of the play, letting the audience assume that Ray killed and cooked it; indeed, in the following scene, Ray brings in a covered dish to his father.

¹³³ Cho, *Aubergine*, 56.

Ray's uncle is the intruding Korean in *Aubergine* and his Koreanness is revealed by the first thing he says to Ray when they first meet: "did you eat?"¹³⁴ That single question in Korean resonates profoundly as a typical and well-documented Korean mindset in which food and culture are inseparable. The term *sik-gu* (식구, 食口), which means family member(s) in Korean, best conveys this connection: that any person who eats with a family becomes a member of that family.¹³⁵ This word signifies the immense value that Koreans bestow upon taking meals together to confirm family ties and to endorse or reaffirm a familial membership. In spite of the growing number of one-person meals or single households, caused by the continual process of industrial development and urbanization, multiple representations of Korean families in contemporary South Korean theater, film, K-drama, and even in K-pop music videos still show the archetypal Korean scene: family members eating together. This cultural importance of food is well represented in *Aubergine*, and Cho deftly incorporates the Korean role of food with each character's story of memories, which amplify the transnational and transcultural connection of diasporic kinship and community. Ray's uncle intrudes on the everydayness of Ray's deathwatch for his father by making Ray remember the past in conjunction with the history of his deceased mother, his family, his father as a young man, Korea, and the war. These memories, told as fragmented stories by Ray's uncle, re-contextualize Ray's everyday life. Writing about Asian American culture politics, Lisa Lowe points out that "the 'past' that is grasped as memory is [...] not a naturalized,

¹³⁴ This line does not appear in Julia Cho's script published by Playwrights Horizons, but the New York premiere performance used it.

¹³⁵ My thanks to Dr. Moon-gyu Kim for his advice to investigate *sik-gu*.

factual past, for the relation to that past is always broken by war, occupation, and displacement. Asian American culture ‘re-members’ the past in and through the fragmentation, loss, and dispersal that constitutes that past.”¹³⁶ Ray’s uncle’s storytelling fragments fill the gaps and cause new constellations of memories by supplying missing puzzle pieces about Ray’s father, mother, and family in between America and Korea, and Ray’s idea of home in progress.

In her analysis of the novel *Itsuka* and the play *Tea*, Ju Yon Kim theorizes about the ritualization of the everyday and finds “the generative possibilities of fusing ritual and the mundane.”¹³⁷ *Aubergine* also projects these “generative possibilities” of the ritualistic act of sharing mundane memories about food. The act of sharing a visceral memory of food while eating together is not just about collectively remembering, but also about producing a triad of sense-perception-energy: the sensory insight that one gains in order to make a different future, or create new and different potentialities for one’s heightened awareness or cognitive development. As Tim Sanford, the Artistic Director of Playwrights Horizons, writes in the introduction to *Aubergine*:

Food serves the perfect metaphorical antonym to death; it stands for the immediacy of life, for openness to joy and pleasure. But the sensory pleasures of food also unlock deep reservoirs of memories, as famously triggered by a madeleine in Proust’s *Swann’s Way*. But the process that gradually opens Ray up to his feelings about his father, his girlfriend, his

¹³⁶ Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 29.

¹³⁷ Kim, *The Racial Mundane*, 79.

Koreanness, and his place in the world, ultimately go beyond the Proustian epiphany of “time recaptured.” Ray’s rediscovery of food sparks in him an almost magical empathy about its powers.¹³⁸

This “magical” element of food—*sohn mat*—is very much at the heart of the play. At the end, after his father’s death, Ray opens a new restaurant with Cornelia. This restaurant with a minimalist setting has neither name nor menu but does include a live turtle in a terrarium. Cornelia tells the lone guest who comes in—the same Diane who appeared in the beginning of the play sharing her memory of her father and the pastrami sandwich he prepared before dying—to trust the chef with whatever he cooks for her and she agrees. With obviously no knowledge of Diane’s significant and highly emotional memory, Ray prepares her a pastrami sandwich. This meal surprises Diane not merely because of the coincidence, but also by the “magical” power of its taste. As critic Robert Kahn points out about this scene: “the woman’s ultimate intersection with Ray is just glancing, yet lends a sweet element of almost magical realism to the proceedings.”¹³⁹ The unexpected intersection between Diane’s memory of her father’s pastrami sandwich and Ray’s preparation of one suggests a special bond, a *communitas* in Victor Turner’s sense: “a spontaneously structured relationship which often develops among liminaries, individuals in passage between social statuses and cultural states that have been cognitively

¹³⁸ Tim Sanford, Artistic Director’s Note on *Aubergine*, Playwrights Horizons Playbill.

¹³⁹ Robert Kahn, “When Words Fail, Bring on the Beef Broth,” *NBC New York*, September 12, 2016, <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/entertainment/the-scene/Review-Aubergine-Playwrights-Horizons-393031861.html>.

defined.”¹⁴⁰ Ray, somehow, knows what food to prepare because both he and Diane share a liminal space created by their father’s deaths. Moving beyond the legitimate formation of biological and ethnic kinship of Korean and Korean American family, the gesture of embracing and intersecting the memories of food by all of Cho’s characters in the play evokes the feelings of community. As an epilogue, the final scene with Diane reveals that Ray has navigated the rite of passage through sharing his memories and has changed his life, gaining a transformative power. Moreover, after Ray’s father’s death, Ray cooks the eggplant that Lucien had given him and presents the dish for Lucien to eat; and it is delicious. Life continues and we live together sharing our food, our hearts, and our memories. Ray’s utopian gesture of sharing food, originally given to him by Lucien, revisits the notion of the sustaining of life, and here, specifically, a new life after death where they now can create new memories together.

The use of space is a key expressive element in *Aubergine*. An everyday living room is transformed into a place of ritual, becoming the father’s deathbed watch, and the mundane “space” of a kitchen is transformed into a ritualized emotionally-charged “place” where eating has a spiritual dimension, connecting people across spatial-temporal boundaries. Unlike the vertically aligned spaces of *American Hwangap* and *Satellites*, the space configurations in *Aubergine*—and as staged in the 2016 New York premiere production—are primarily horizontal. For example, in the beginning of *Aubergine*, after a short scene in the hospital where Ray’s father lies in a coma on a hospital bed in the middle of the stage, the next scene reveals Ray’s father in exactly the same central spot

¹⁴⁰ Victor Turner, *Revelation and Divination in Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 22.

on the stage, but now he is in the middle of his home. Ray is told that due to lack of space in the bedroom, the bed and medical instruments were put in the middle of the dining room, ironically locating a man who found no joy whatsoever in food in the middle of a dining area. His father's body is moved horizontally, along the same flat plane, from his hospital bed to his hospice bed in the living room. This lateral spatial movement suggests an infinite space, with no discernible beginning or end; perhaps the space of Ray's father next destination: his grave. By transforming the dining room to a dying man's bedroom, the spatial arrangement conveys an ambiguous continuity and/or continual synchronicity between death and life. The horizontal movement across space superimposes different meanings, locations, temporalities onto the same physical space in *Aubergine* and transforms the dining room into a ritualistic space where the separate realms of death and life merge, proposing an alternative way of understanding the locational identity of the dining room. In the production, the boundaries of spaces, present and transformative, overlap but essentially remain connected. A movable circular wall that would usually serve to differentiate distinct spaces slides open or close to construct a hospital, living room, dining room, kitchen, café, and restaurant, creating "an ambiguous continuity."¹⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre writes of an "intertwinement of social spaces" that exists by virtue of "bunches or clusters of relationships."¹⁴² Clusters of relationships are formed between the physical spaces in *Aubergine*, as physical boundaries that are unfixed allow every space to interconnect with each other. These are infused with the emotional and physical state

¹⁴¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 87.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 86.

of each character and intertwined with the relationships between them. Unlike Min Suk in *American Hwangap* and Nina in *Satellites*, whose movements through space are driven by their actions in a vertical world, Ray's movement through the horizontality of space brings him to the portal of a new understanding through a contemplative journey. After Ray's father's death, Ray goes to Korea with his uncle, and as they visit Ray's mother's grave on a Korean mountaintop, the grave is placed in the center of the stage, exactly where his father's bed used to be in the middle of the dining room. His uncle then says, "welcome home." The space of the Korean mountaintop grave site superimposed onto the dining room space is striking, as it is the only time in the play that an outdoor scene is shown. Superimposition is a way of "clustering" as more layers of significance across different temporalities are added to a single physical space. The setting is even more arresting in that, although still connected to the theme of death, it conveys a sense of peace and serenity as the scene is filled with natural beauty and daylight, in stark contrast to the drab interior of the dining room. The center of the stage, shared only by Ray's father's bed in the hospital, his bed in their dining room, and Ray's mother's grave, utilizes the space of the stage to convey the in-betweenness of death and life, echoing the thought that "a critical cultural politics of diaspora should privilege neither host country nor (real or imaginary) homeland, but precisely keep a creative tension between 'where you're from' and 'where you're at.'" ¹⁴³ The center stage becomes symbolic of the mental space which members of the diaspora are meant to seek out and inhabit: home is neither "back there" nor "over here," but something in between. The triangulated relationship of

¹⁴³ Ien Ang, "On Not Speaking Chinese: Postmodern Ethnicity and the Politics of Diaspora," *New Formations* 24 (1994): 1-18.

these spaces is layered with the everydayness of the dining room, the memories about the father who faces death and the unremembered mother's death in a remote place that is nonetheless another home for Ray. The conflation of the three spaces suggests a horizontal relationship, and although the scene in Korea set on a mountaintop holds a certain verticality, the grave site still lies flat on the ground.

Ray's uncle may be the Korean intrusion in the play, but memories are the real intruders in Ray's life. The interconnecting relationships between characters, spaces, and memories reveal the liminal state of living within death and dying within life. This mirrors the diasporic belonging to a space that is culturally neither South Korea nor the United States. Lowe argues that "the Asian American critique of citizenship generated by its specific history opens the space for such cross-racial and cross-national possibilities."¹⁴⁴ Ray and his uncle's newly established cross-national and cross-cultural kinship and their personal/familial history contest the rigidity of the demarcation of belonging in the United States. This idea is conveyed in the scene where the dining room space morphs into the mountaintop grave site, and Ray and his uncle seamlessly cross over from the United States to Korea. Among the three plays, *Aubergine* is the only one in which a character is actually seen in Korea. Ray's visit to his "homeland" allows him to reconnect with his mother and with his diasporic origins and leads him to accept death as part of life. For Ray, this is a transformative experience through which he recaptures his previously lost magical power of *sohn-mat* and gains a newly found inner peace reconciling with his past.

¹⁴⁴ Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 35.

In *Aubergine*, food and space function similarly to reconnect forgotten memories and severed relationships to create a sense of liminal belonging. Cho shows us that even complete strangers like Diane and Ray can become connected through the magical powers of food. The dynamic use of space is also a connecting factor, linking the characters not only physically but also spiritually. The magical power of space is seen in the way that all spaces in the play fluidly connect to one another, dissolving into each other, and as a result are always interrelated across multiple uses, temporalities, and locations. Neither space nor food is fixed, but both have the same purpose: to be shared. It is through food and memories that the characters in *Aubergine* bond into their special *communitas*, and it is through the transformational medium of space that rituals for both the living and the dead conjure the power to ultimately inspire hope.

Conclusion

bell hooks writes “home is no longer just one place. It is locations. Home is that place which enables and promotes varied and ever-changing perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the constructions of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become.”¹⁴⁵ In the three plays discussed in this chapter, home is never static: it is an impermanent space that is always in construction or need of repair; a place through which people pass but do not always plan to stay; a space where people form bonds through the sharing of food and memories. Each of the three plays dramatizes a different type of Korean American family in which a

¹⁴⁵ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), 148.

diasporic and dysfunctional home becomes a site of liminal belonging where a conversation about history, race, and memory unfolds.¹⁴⁶ As these Korean American family dramas navigate through the struggles and conflicts between the characters, a hope for family and community emerges. This hope is not about desire to succeed financially or for upward mobility but about a future of integration and harmony that lies in the process of configuring the Korean diaspora in and out of the United States. This map of hope is spatially embodied in *American Hwangap*, *Satellites*, and *Aubergine*, and the rituals dramatized in all three family dramas reveal the liminality of being Korean/American. The shared goal of all three plays is to create a somehow utopic space of liminal belonging across the historical, racial, and cultural landscapes of the Korean diaspora. In this sense, home in these plays form a space, an “other place” that is ever changing, in an inter-racial, inter-generational, cross-cultural, and trans-historical Korean diaspora in which the characters find their sense of belonging in their own ways. It is precisely because home is fluid and unfixed that it allows the characters to create and reconfigure what home means for them.

¹⁴⁶ The three Korean American family variations discussed in this chapter mainly depict the nuclear family structure and heterosexual relationships. In the next chapters, a section on Margaret Cho and her Korean American woman queerness, and a section on Korean adoptee transnational family will explore different aspects of Korean diasporic experiences pertaining to sexuality and kinship within and beyond the United States.

CHAPTER 2

UTOPIIC COMMUNITY THROUGH KOREAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S BODIES:
THE DIVERSIFICATION OF THE KOREAN DIASPORA IN PERFORMANCE

Introduction

This chapter examines the female body in performance: Margaret Cho's embodiments of Koreanness on stage in her 2015 *PsyCHO* stand-up comedy act, Dohee Lee's bodily engagement with Korean shamanism in her 2017 ritual-performance entitled *Mu/巫* (*Mu*) and Miru Kim's naked body in public spaces in her photographed site-specific performance *Naked City Spleen* (2008).¹⁴⁷ My argument is that these artists' bodies as liminal conduits not only disrupt sexual, spiritual, and spatial belonging, but also formulate a utopic community through which a new diasporic sense of belonging emerges in their performances.

This chapter explains how the diversification of the Korean diaspora is reflected in performance. Varied experiences and life trajectories lead these women artists to

¹⁴⁷ I attended Margaret Cho's 2015 *PsyCHO* performance at the Gramercy Theatre in New York City and analyzed both the live performance and the filmed version for this chapter. I also attended Dohee Lee's 2017 *Mu/巫* performance at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater in Los Angeles. My discussion of Miru Kim's *Naked City Spleen* is based on her photographed works from her official website as well as my 2016 interview with Kim in New York City.

perform the Korean diaspora in distinctly different ways: Margaret Cho as a second-generation Korean American, Dohee Lee as an immigrant of Korean descent, and Miru Kim as a Korean American who does not fit in the clear categorization of being either Korean or American. Cho's use of Koreanness in her stand-up comedy act that critically engages with the experience of Korean cultures and Lee's practice of Korean shamanism that actively identifies as diasporic are explicitly reflected in their works. Kim, however, does not bring any particular conversation about Korean culture, custom, demeanor, or identity into her work. This absence of Korean-identified elements in her performance discloses Kim's complex identity formation and her artistic intention to step away from any cultural signifier. I will examine Kim's works and her position as a counter-example to the other two artists who actively engage with Korean cultural experiences and identity in this chapter.

My choice of focusing on the three Korean American women performing artists is to reveal how they challenge the demarcation of Korean diasporic women in the United States, perpetuated by mainstream media for the continuation of the narratives of assimilation, a/sexualization, and silence.¹⁴⁸ Echoing Uri McMillan's view on the

¹⁴⁸ An all-Asian American female panel I attended at the Asian American Arts Alliance in 2017 discussed the depiction of Asian Americans in the history of film and TV. Media clips screened ranged in issues such as "whitewashing" (Katherine Hepburn portraying a Chinese villager resisting the Japanese imperial army in the 1944 film *Dragon Seed*), and assimilation through silencing (American actress of Korean ancestry Hana Mae Lee who played a demure inaudible young Asian woman in a U.S. university singing group in the 2012 *Pitch Perfect*), among other examples. Maya Deshmukh, Diana Oh, Anna

importance of locating black women's performance at the center of conversation about art, the location of Korean American women artists (and Asian American women artists by extension) should be reconsidered to acknowledge the importance of recognizing the diversity of being and becoming the Korean diaspora in the U.S.¹⁴⁹ Through their performances the three Korean diasporic women artists contribute in reconfiguring the Korean diaspora from "other" to "utopic."

Jill Dolan examines utopian performatives that create an allyship in audiences who subsequently feel the potential of surmounting possible obstacles.¹⁵⁰ These utopian performatives thus "allow fleeting contact with a utopia not stabilized by its own finished perfection, not coercive in its contained, self-reliant, self-determined system, but a utopia

Suzuki, and Becky Yamamoto, "Flipping the Script: Tiger Ladies Strike Back!," Panel Discussion, Asian American Arts Alliance, Brooklyn, NY, August 8, 2017. The New York City based Asian American Arts Alliance's mission is to strengthen "Asian American arts and cultural groups in through resource sharing, promotion, and community building," <http://aaartsalliance.org/page/mission-1>.

¹⁴⁹ McMillan points out that he has "positioned black women performers at its center [...] to trouble the focus on white female subjectivity that serves as an unofficial norm and to recognize that the initial prejudice the black art world cognoscenti expressed toward performance art was tied to the gender of its practitioners." Uri McMillan, *Embodied Avatars: Genealogies of Black Feminist Art and Performance* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 3.

¹⁵⁰ Jill Dolan, *Utopia in Performance: Finding Hope at the Theater* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 2.

always in process, always only partially grasped, as it disappears before us around the corners of narrative and social experience.”¹⁵¹ Dolan clarifies these utopian performatives by stating that they are an everlasting process moving toward a prospective brighter future.¹⁵² Here, utopia is not a “real” space, but actually connects to Thomas Moore’s concept of utopia: no place. According to Dolan, utopia can be envisioned and felt through what theater and performance provide and how they interact with their spectators. Contextualizing Korean diasporic women’s bodies through this concept of utopian performativity, this chapter further demonstrates how a utopic community materializes and vanishes within the interaction with spectators in every performance and how this utopic community allows spectators to experience a feeling of change in their intellectual, spiritual, and emotional interaction outside of performance spaces. As Dolan asserts that the possibility of utopia embodied in theater and performance is “a gesture of commitment toward community,” the chapter analyzes the three women’s performances as they configure an affective dimension of the utopic possibility of transformation, coexistence, and belonging/un-belonging.¹⁵³

Angry Talking Body in Margaret Cho’s *PsyCHO*

Margaret Cho is the first Asian American woman, and specifically, the first Korean American woman who became famous in the field of stand-up comedy and

¹⁵¹ Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 6.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 44.

recognized by mainstream North American media.¹⁵⁴ Cho stated that without any Asian American comedians to look up to, the performers she admired included Richard Pryor, Steve Martin, Robin Williams—with whom she was close and who she described as a father figure—and Joan Rivers, whom she considered her mentor, as well as Rosie O’Donnell and Roseanne Barr.¹⁵⁵ After her success, Cho influenced other female stand-

¹⁵⁴ Japanese American stand-up comic and actor Pat Morita should be mentioned here as the first male Asian American stand-up comic touring nightclubs in the 1960s and 70s. Up until the mid-1960s, stand-up comedy in the United States had been predominantly performed by white male comedians who told jokes mostly written by others. From the late 1950s until his death in 1966, Lenny Bruce changed the course of stand-up comedy by performing as a social critic who “challenged the guardians of public morality.” As Bruce had pushed the envelope, a new slate of rebel stand-up comedians appeared. By the 1970s, many comedians, such as George Carlin and Richard Pryor, changed their career paths, choosing an antiestablishment, provocative style of comedy. Soon, African American and Latino men, and eventually women comedians as well, spoke openly and many times brazenly about themselves, their race, their gender and sexuality, and how they navigated their lives in a U.S. society that would much prefer to keep them in their place. Richard Zoglin, *Comedy at the Edge: How Stand-up in the 1970s Changed America* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 2-3. Two Asian American comedians that should be mentioned here are Steve Park who was a regular cast member in the TV show *In Living Color* (1991-1992), and Phil Nee who won Showtime cable channel’s “Funniest Person in America Contest.” See Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre*, 206.

¹⁵⁵ Caroline Tiger, *Margaret Cho* (New York: Chelsea House, 2007), 32-3.

up comedians such as Amy Schumer and Sarah Silverman but, as importantly, paved the way for a new generation of Asian American comedians, both male and female such as Korean Americans Bobby Lee, Randall Park, and Joel Kim Booster; Chinese and Vietnamese American Ali Wong; and Taiwanese American Jenny Yang, among others.

Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy is closely connected to her personal story, particularly to her upbringing in a Korean immigrant family in the United States.¹⁵⁶ Born and raised in San Francisco, Cho and Cho's family were affected by the racism that originated from early twentieth-century immigration policy. She was made her painfully aware of her otherness at a young age. When she was still a baby, her father was deported from the United States. When he returned, he was determined that Cho and her brother should not have any trace of Korean accent so that they would not be perceived as foreigners. He would speak to them in Korean but insisted that they answer him in English. Her father's deportation and his subsequent language edict traumatized Cho, and although she can understand Korean, to this day she cannot speak it at all: "my father now has his citizenship and it's impossible for him to be deported, and I was born here, so I'm not going to get deported. But I feel like if I start speaking Korean someone is

¹⁵⁶ On many occasions, Cho employs the history and interactions with her own family members for her comic acts. Cho's grandfather was a Methodist minister in Seoul who managed an orphanage during the Korean War. Her mother ignored patriarchal culture traditions by refusing to accept a pre-arranged marriage in Korea. Instead, she married Margaret's father and moved to San Francisco where they ran a bookstore called "Paperback Traffic" in the heart of San Francisco's LGBTQ community and where her father wrote jokes in Korean.

going to get deported.”¹⁵⁷ Later, as a teenager, it was through the marginalized image of her Koreanness in comparison to whiteness as the center of America that Cho perceived herself as being deviant, and the power of the media only reinforced this feeling of alienation. At the age of twelve, Cho recalls reading a copy of *Seventeen Magazine*:

My Koreanness, my “otherness,” embarrassed me...my entire world was an exercise in not belonging. The answer seemed to lie in being white, so in my fantasy life, I chose to be Lori Laughlin [...who] set the beauty standard, and as I looked at her, my troubles would melt away. “Someday I will be seventeen...” But the thing I couldn’t admit to myself was that I was really wishing “Someday... I will be *white*.”¹⁵⁸

Cho started writing jokes at the age of fourteen and performing as a stand-up comic when she was sixteen. After a few years she became well known on the comedy club circuit. Her breakthrough came when she won a comedy contest: the first prize was opening for Jerry Seinfeld. Cho moved to Los Angeles in the early 1990s and immediately became a huge success, performing over three hundred concerts in a two-year period and also on late night television shows.

In 1994, at the age of twenty-six, Cho won the American Comedy Award for Best Female Comedian. That same year, the ABC television network created the first Korean American TV show, specifically tailored for her, called *All-American Girl*. Even though the ABC sitcom was all about Cho—as a non-conforming liberal Korean American

¹⁵⁷ Andrea Miller, “Margaret Cho’s Comedy Is about Compassion,” *Lion’s Roar*, September 1, 2013, <https://www.lionsroar.com/qa-margaret-cho-september-2013>.

¹⁵⁸ Margaret Cho, *I’m the One That I Want* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2002), 15.

woman—the network executives at first asked her to “tone it down” for the show—“it” referring to her ethnic quality. This criticism challenged Cho for who she was: “for fear of being too ‘ethnic,’ the show got so watered down for television that by the end, it was completely lacking in the essence of what I am and what I do.”¹⁵⁹ After having toned down the ethnicity, especially the particularities of Koreanness, the ratings were still poor. The executives then tried the opposite and hired an Asian consultant because they felt that Cho was now not being Asian/Korean enough: “he would follow me around, ‘Margaret, use chopsticks. Use chopsticks. And when you're done eating, you can put them in your hair.’”¹⁶⁰ Viewer criticisms—especially from the Asian American community—were negative, as they saw the show as “reproducing Orientalist images, the model minority stereotype” and, as media studies scholars Rona Halualani and Leah Vande Berg stated, submissive women stereotypes.¹⁶¹ Sarah Moon Cassinelli points out the problem of the show: “the flaws of *All-American Girl* are not in the construction of Asian American family, but in the ways the family became a vehicle to perpetuate a

¹⁵⁹ Cho quoted in “Margaret Cho – an Interview!” *KALTBLUT* Magazine, November 1, 2013. <http://www.kaltblut-magazine.com/margaret-cho-an-interview/>.

¹⁶⁰ Kyra Phillips, “CNN People in the News, Profiles of Alanis Morissette, Margaret Cho,” aired January 4, 2003. <http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0301/04/pitn.00.html>.

¹⁶¹ Rona Halualani and Leah Vande Berg cited by Kent A. Ono and Vincent Pham, *Asian Americans and the Media* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 131.

stereotypical vision of immigration, race identity, and ethnicity in American culture.”¹⁶²

The issue that I also identify in this TV show is the conflated practice of blind multiculturalism that celebrates cultural difference but without recognizing the crucial power relations entangled with what it means to be an Asian American and particularly a Korean American in the 1990s. The ethnic family structure and experiences in *All-American Girl* became the perfect vehicle to serve the blind multicultural perspectives in which everyone could feel comfortable laughing at immigration, race, and identity issues without actually understanding or analyzing the deep-rooted importance of these issues. Cho’s subversiveness, which made her famous before this sitcom, disappeared into the superficiality of fabricated Asianness/Koreanness rooted in the reification of a white, male, Orientalist imagination and the perpetuation of blind multiculturalism both rooted in U.S. mainstream mass media.

The network executives also criticized Cho’s physical appearance. One day her producer told her: “the network has a problem with you. They are concerned about the fullness of your face. You need to lose weight.”¹⁶³ Since the American ideal of female beauty was based on women’s physicality as primarily white and thin, these criticisms about her race and her body were devastating for Cho. They brought up unresolved childhood feelings. This form of oppression exerted by the network executives marginalized Cho not only for being an Asian woman in a white mainstream medium, but

¹⁶² Sarah Moon Cassinelli, “‘If we are Asian, then are we funny?’ Margaret Cho’s *All-American Girl* as the First (and Last?) Asian American Sitcom,” *Studies in American Humor*, New Series 3, no. 17 (2008): 131-44. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42573541>.

¹⁶³ Cho, *I’m the One that I Want*, 106.

also for *not* being a *thin* Asian woman. Female thinness as a very visible element of power generated by the racist and sexist system of mainstream media infiltrated Cho's body, mind, identity, and life. The remarks about her face and her weight ran deep wounds into her self-identification. "I hated myself, but I thought that this show would somehow rectify that. If I got love from millions of people, then how could I still hate myself? Maybe I could be happy. Maybe this would do it for me. Maybe it was okay that I wasn't white, tall, thin, blonde, gorgeous, or a guy. [...] Maybe I would make it okay for Asians to be on TV."¹⁶⁴ Stuck in this self-scrutiny over her body and haunted by society's ideal of a thin female body, Cho became so obsessed with pleasing the executives that she starved herself. This form of flesh-loathing—a weapon of sexist oppression that has been racialized in the United States—reduced Cho to the Asian female stereotype, mortifying herself into what Sandra Lee Bartky calls "being-made-to-be-aware of one's own flesh."¹⁶⁵ Criticized for her character's model minority and subservient woman stereotype, not fitting the dragon lady or Geisha girl/China doll stereotype, and unable to become tall, thin, blonde, and white, Cho turned her hatred against her body and attempted to change the only feature she had control of: her weight. She lost thirty pounds in two weeks and landed in the hospital with kidney failure.¹⁶⁶ After her recovery, Cho took diet pills and laxatives and killed her hunger with alcohol

¹⁶⁴ Cho, *I'm the One that I Want*, 104.

¹⁶⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 27.

¹⁶⁶ Cho, *I'm the One that I Want*, 111.

and cigarettes. She kept this up during the entire taping of *All-American Girl* until it was cancelled after only nineteen episodes.

Recovering from her lowest point, Cho refused to be objectified by mainstream media and instead mirrored its racist and sexist representations of Asian American women. Cho performed in a critically acclaimed off-Broadway show *I'm the One that I Want* (2000), and her second show *Notorious C.H.O.* (2002) culminated in a successful engagement at Carnegie Hall. She also published a memoir *I'm the One that I Want* (2001), and later a second book, *I Have Chosen to Stay and Fight* (2005). In 2009, Cho acted in the hit comedy TV series *Drop Dead Diva* and in 2012 earned an Emmy nomination for her gender-bending guest portrayal as North Korean leader Kim Jong Il on the sitcom *30 Rock*.¹⁶⁷ As a LGBTQ supporter, Cho competed on season 11 of ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* in a gay-pride-themed outfit and expressed her views on the need to defend young gay people from bullying. In 2016, Cho was very much in the news due to a series of email exchanges with the British film star Tilda Swinton about the issue of

¹⁶⁷ At the 2015 Golden Globe Awards, Cho appeared as a North Korean journalist member of the Hollywood Foreign Press Association. With a whitened face and speaking broken English with a guttural accent, Cho's performance was severely criticized as "yellowface." Analyzing Cho's reaction to the backlash in which she justified her incarnation by asserting her Korean ancestry and that she had family in North Korea, Ju Yon Kim interestingly pointed out that Cho's "body acted as a bridge (through assumptions of kinship) and as a medium of distancing (through caricature)." See Kim, "In the Space Made from Separation," 315.

“whitewashing” in Hollywood films.¹⁶⁸ In 2017, she earned a Grammy nomination for her album *American Myth*. Today, Cho continues to tour and is developing a dramedy for Amazon called *Highland*.

In *PsyCHO*, Cho disrupts the demarcated boundary of sexual and ethnic belonging scripted in lesbian and Korean American communities to envision a liberation based on tolerance of difference and intersectional consciousness about diversity within both groups.¹⁶⁹ Cho starts her performance with the expression of caring thoughts and feelings—though articulated through anger. At the beginning of the performance, Cho

¹⁶⁸ Introduced by a mutual acquaintance, Tilda Swinton emailed Margaret Cho to help her explain why the Asian public was upset at Swinton having been cast as a Celtic character in the film version of the *Doctor Strange* comic book in which the original character is a Tibetan male sorcerer. See Rich Juzwiak, “Tilda Swinton Sent Us Her Email Exchange with Margaret Cho About Doctor Strange, Diversity, and Whitewashing,” in *Jezebel*, December 16, 2016, <http://jezebel.com/tilda-swinton-sent-us-her-email-exchange-with-margaret-1790203875>). Also, Jessica Prois, “Tilda Swinton’s Email To Margaret Cho Is Textbook White Feminism,” in *Huffington Post*, December 21, 2016, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/tilda-swinton-maragaret-cho-white-feminism_us_585a8eb4e4b0de3a08f3962e. Cho first discussed her entire email exchange on her friend Bobby Lee’s podcast (Tigerbelly, “Episode 71: Margaret Cho and the Yellow Telephone,” December 14, 2016, <https://tigerbelly.libsyn.com/episode-71>) thus making it public.

¹⁶⁹ Margaret Cho, *PsyCHO*, directed by John Asher (filmed March 7, 2015, the Gramercy Theatre, New York, video, 81:00), <https://www.netflix.com/Title/80101550>.

speaks about two iconic, recently deceased celebrities to whom she was very close, Robin Williams and Joan Rivers, in relation to their social and personal issues. She talks about Robin Williams' compassion for homeless people and Joan Rivers' visit to a rape center. Cho also talks about her connection to the ABC TV sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* as the first representation of an Asian American family on network television in twenty years since her seminal (yet failed) 1994 TV sitcom *All American Girl*.¹⁷⁰ She states how proud she is of *Fresh Off the Boat* and the fact that its creator Eddie Huang contacted her to get her advice. She discloses how deeply she cares that the representation of Asian Americans

¹⁷⁰ The term “fresh off the boat” is used toward other newly arrived immigrants, especially Asian immigrants, and it is in this way that Eddie Huang, the chef and food personality on whose book *Fresh Off the Boat: A Memoir* the sitcom with the same name is loosely based, uses the term. The story of the ABC TV sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* follows Huang and his Taiwanese family's relocation from Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown to Orlando, Florida where his father starts a cowboy-themed steak restaurant in 1995. Louis Huang, played by Randall Park; Jessica Huang, played by Constance Wu; and their three boys struggle with the all-white Florida community in which they now find themselves. Even though during the show's first season in 2015 there were two other TV shows about Asian Americans—*Selfie*, a comedy starring John Cho and *Dr. Ken* with Ken Jeong, *Fresh Off the Boat* undeniably broke new ground as the first successful show with Asian protagonists on a major television network (running the fourth season with seventy episodes at the time of writing this chapter in 2017). For Cho's 2017 stand-up comedy performance, she blends this title with humor by calling her show *Fresh Off the Bloat*.

is—and should be—created in the film and TV industries, especially since a false representation by white network executives was forced on her, which led to the early demise of her 1994 sitcom.

The title of her show is a play on words, with an obvious reference to Hitchcock's 1960 classic thriller *Psycho* with Anthony Perkins as a cross-dressing psychopath, and referring to herself and her anger. Philip Auslander theorizes women stand-up comedians' manifestations of their anger at patriarchal power in public sphere as fem-rage.¹⁷¹ In the *PsyCHO* show Cho shares that she was raped when she was young. Cho connects her personal fem-rage against her rapist to political fem-rage against multiple incidents of rape, murder, and violence against women and gays in recent world history: from Indian women whose faces were burnt by acid thrown by men and young Nigerian girls kidnapped and forced into marriage by Nigeria's militant group Boko Haram to the 1998 gay-hating killers of Matthew Shepard. Incorporating a corporeal image of fem-rage, Cho jokes about how to deal with Boko Haram: "I want to put together a badass crew of pissed-off women to just go over there [Nigeria] and just, let's just go get'em. [...] We'll get together, we'll train, we'll all hang out so much, we get on the same cycle. And then we will go the week before. I'm talking about Shark Week. So we will go and we will teach Boko Haram a lesson about women and education."¹⁷² She then lists a slew of incidents against women and gay men and tells us that she would like to do the same

¹⁷¹ Philip Auslander, "'Brought to You by Fem-Rage': Stand-up Comedy and the Politics of Gender," in *Acting Out: Feminist Performances*, eds. Lynda Hart and Peggy Phelan (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 315-336.

¹⁷² Margaret Cho: *PsyCHO*.

thing to all those who have perpetrated these crimes and other offenses: “I want to kill every child molester, every rapist.”¹⁷³ Cho’s radical expression of fem-rage as a feminist tool reshaping the power dynamics between the perpetrator and the victim demonstrates how much she cares and how far she would go to redress the injustices that also inscribe silence on women and gay survivors of violence. She finishes her outburst with the play on words from the title of her show by saying that she is willing to do these acts of violent retribution “because there is no ‘I’ in ‘team’ but there is a ‘Cho’ in ‘psycho.’”¹⁷⁴ In effect, Cho has found a way to channel her fem-rage into stimulating her artistic expression: “my rage is really keeping me alive, my rage is my art.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Regarding her vivid language expressing violent acts, Margaret Cho stated: “It’s because I am also a rape victim. I am a childhood sexual abuse survivor.” In a later interview about her song entitled “I Want to Kill My Rapist” from her new music album, *American Myth*, Cho said: “we want to kill the rapists. I’m a victim and now a survivor of sexual abuse and rape, and I think it’s really hard to talk about it. I think having a song to perform live will allow others to talk about it. It’s a huge issue, and this was cathartic for me.” Danielle Bacher, “Margaret Cho Gets Deep about Past Sexual Abuse: ‘All I Have Is Ownership of My Own Suffering’ (Exclusive Interview),” *Billboard*, September 2, 2015, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/6678375/margaret-cho-sexual-abuse-bullying-psycho-comedy-tour-album-robin-williams-joan-rivers>.

¹⁷⁴ Margaret Cho: *PsyCHO*.

¹⁷⁵ Caitlin Gibson, “Margaret Cho: ‘My Rage Is Really Keeping Me Alive’,” *Washington Post*, November 20, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/margaret-cho->

One of the most distinctive features in Cho's 2015 *PsyCHO* performance is that her comedy has evolved beyond unfolding these systems of sexism, racism, and heterosexism. Her comedy attempts to disclose a segregating notion of belonging in terms of difference *within* lesbian and Korean American communities, and Cho performs this as a caring gesture, to allow these communities to reimagine a radical inclusion to stand together, thus inspiring her kindred to embrace our own diversity and have more friends, lovers, families, and build an even more inclusive future. Cho states that because she's bisexual she's "never been sort of comfortable within the lesbian community" because she doesn't "seem like a true lesbian."¹⁷⁶ She shares a story disrupting the silencing of varied forms of lesbian existence within lesbian communities. Cho went on tour in England, and after one of her performances she was approached by a white English lesbian. Cho embodies this woman by pushing her front teeth forward, holding her shoulders tight to her sides, squinting, and saying with a heavy and pompous English accent: "can I offer you some criticism?" The criticism that this woman gave Cho was simply this: "there's not really enough lesbian representation."¹⁷⁷ Cho repeats this line several times revealing this woman's strong disapproval—or perhaps Cho's own interpretation of that disapproval—thinking that her act would have a lot more talk about lesbians and, more specifically, about *her* type of lesbian representation: white and Eurocentric. This woman's objection conveys the socially constructed idea that Asian

my-age-is-really-keeping-me-alive/2015/11/20/5e149e92-8ed7-11e5-ae1f-af46b7df8483_story.html?utm_term=.a91590d3c6fa.

¹⁷⁶ Margaret Cho: *PsyCHO*.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

women cannot possibly be queer because Asian women have been stereotyped as hypersexualized heterosexuals and Asian American women specifically constructed as being obtainable by white men.¹⁷⁸ Cho's repeated embodiment of the comment by this woman also brings up, in my view, the question of the issue of authenticity within the lesbian community, reiterating the hegemonic lesbian archetype: the butch-femme dichotomy. Adrienne Rich writes that lesbian existence exists in a continuum embracing a wide range of woman-identified lesbian experiences, discarding the clinical terminology that ignores the diversity and fluidity of lesbian experiences within that spectrum. Rich views lesbian experience as an act of resistance against compulsory heteronormativity that has been constructed and historically institutionalized and affects contemporary society in which women's own sexuality is denied.¹⁷⁹ Although Rich's article was written in 1980, it is still relevant in the queer community. Even with gay marriage becoming more accepted and queer communities becoming more pandered to by politicians and corporations, the including/excluding of trans people in female spaces and the "heteronorming" of previously queer spaces create factions in favor of compulsory heteronormativity and thus against lesbianism and bisexuality as well. Echoing Rich's concept of lesbian existence and in opposition to lesbian essentialism, Cho's enactment of her experience of the denial of recognition as a bisexual woman discloses how lesbian communities still have to build a wider range of acceptance and

¹⁷⁸ Rosalind S. Chou, *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 9.

¹⁷⁹ Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1980): 631-660.

join the resistance in favor of what Rich views as a “continuum.” Cho describes herself as a bisexual Asian woman who self-identifies with a “Marcie femme” type (referring to Peppermint Patty’s friend in the *Peanuts* Cartoon), being in between the dichotomous lesbian identities of femme and butch.¹⁸⁰ Cho thus destabilizes the homogenizing force of demarcating the diverse formations of lesbian existence—including her own bisexuality as a liminal identity between heterosexuality and homosexuality—along with discussing her racially intermediate position as an Asian in between black and white. Moreover, her “Not Really Enough Lesbian Representation” act goes further than the in-betweenness of her identity formations. Her exposure of being a “Marcie femme” and her overt mimicry of the criticism of the lack of lesbian representation in her performance attack the invisible power that forces queerness into belonging to be either femme or butch, thus ignoring the complexity and the diversity of lesbian subjectivities within lesbian communities.

The conversation of queerness that Cho engenders is not irrelevant to the topic of Korean diaspora, because if we eliminate the Korean performing artist talking about queerness we are then perpetuating the dualistic view of ethnicity vs. sexuality. In the U.S. queerness in general is seen as a liberal existence, but being Korean has been heteronormatized making queerness impossible even to be imagined within the ethnic culture. Ethnic identity as Korean and sexual identity as bisexual are seen to be in conflict with each other. Cho’s single body with multiple identifications such as bisexual and Korean American reflects its liminal state in between both identities. Within this discussion, Cho, who is a pioneering Korean American figure and openly gay,

¹⁸⁰ Margaret Cho: *PsyCHO*.

destabilizes this dualistic point of view coming from a U.S. hegemony that eliminated any prospect of an Asian queer or a Korean queer ethnic identity. Talking about this duality opens up the possibility of Korean queerness. Korean diaspora comes in many shapes and forms; for Cho, this includes queerness, and she claims her sexuality as Korean queer beyond the culturally traditional conservative Korean American and Asian American communities.¹⁸¹

Switching the subject to Korean Americans, Cho offers an implicit critique of the internalized force of a model minority stereotype within Korean American communities that marginalize difference within. She talks about her Korean *jjimjilbang* (찜질방) experience in Los Angeles. A *jjimjilbang* is a Korean spa where one can enjoy spa services as well as entertainment such as food, massage, games, and movies. The spa is divided into male and female and nude and non-nude sections. These spas provide patrons with a cloth that is optional to wear in the nude zone. Cho went into the nude women's section without the cloth as allowed. As she walked around the spa, Cho tells the audience members, she experienced "dirty looks" from Korean women. Eventually the Korean manager found her and ordered her to put on the spa's garment because her body made other patrons uncomfortable. But it wasn't Cho's naked body that made the patrons uneasy; it was the fact that Cho has so many tattoos all over her body. Cho's

¹⁸¹ The first national gathering of Queer and Trans Korean Americans (KQTcon) took place in New York City in April 2018. One wonders if such a gathering would have transpired if Cho had not started openly claiming her identity as a Korean queer and become a queer pioneer decades ago. For more information about KQTcon, see <https://www.kqtcon.org/>.

naked all-tattooed body, as an eyesore spectacle of marked deviance from “normative” Koreanness in that particular space, was subjected to scrutiny and regulation by voyeuristic looks and judgments that want to define what kind of body types are allowed to belong in the community. In the performance, she reveals her all-tattooed stomach to her audience members to show the “thing” that underwent a shaming examination to screen a non-normative body out of a public sphere. Cho rolls up her tank top to her mid-waist and rolls down her shorts a little from her stomach to expose her completely tattooed abdomen. She then tells her entire spa story with her tattooed belly uncovered. By her self-objectification—to make a point on how those Korean patrons viewed her body as an object—she turns her body into a performative text to be read. Her being bullied, shamed, and censored in this Korean spa due to her eccentric body type, specifically her multi-tattooed body, exposes the limitations of Korean American hard-line conservative conformists in terms of expressing consciousness, acceptance, and tolerance for difference. In the spa, the space had been identified as Korean, even though located in the U.S., and thus culturally “appropriate” body types seized the right to marginalize “other” forms of body in order for those to either conform or be ostracized. Although Cho in the show explicitly stresses that marginalizing people who look different and behave differently is wrong, she explains that, historically, Koreans have a biased perception of tattoos, originating from the culture of gangsters after the Korean War. She also states that the Korean spa later apologized and offered her a free spa day, but only after Cho had written about this online and created a storm of fans upset about her treatment at the spa. Yet Cho recounts this incident in her performance not to accuse Korean people in the U.S. of discrimination but as a disruptive wake-up call for Korean

Americans to formulate an inclusive belonging and embrace diverse perspectives within their communities. Therefore, Cho's stories of personal incidents—such as those of the lesbian audience member and the Korean spa patrons and manager—agitate against the segregating effect that mutes heterogeneity in LGBTQ communities and generates a huge barrier for the Korean population to create a diversity-conscious enclave. The goal of Cho's disruption is to make audiences aware of this system of segregation within “us,” thus liberating us from those chains of silence that are constructed based on presumed sameness and homogeneity.

The artist-audience relationship is very significant in Cho's work as she develops a powerful sense of belonging with her spectators, creating what I call “spect-allies.”¹⁸² Through her alliance with her spectators, Cho transforms audiences into an intersectional and affective agency of “spect-allyhood,” encouraging them to revolt against multiple forms of violence and the silence oppressing women and the LGBTQ community. Cho uses the medium of stand-up comedy not only to express her personal and political views, but also to publicly actualize her own autonomous self and intersectional experiences as a Korean-American bisexual woman. Feminist legal studies scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw conceptualizes intersectionality by analyzing African American women's experiences of oppression such as racism and/or sexism, which cannot be fully explained by one single axis of either race or gender. Their experiences are mutually intersected with gender and

¹⁸² Augusto Boal created the term “Spect-Actor” to denote a new kind of spectator that would no longer be passive but actively involved in the scene and offer solutions to the problems of oppression. Augusto Boal, preface to *Theater of the Oppressed* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), xxi.

race but also with other systems of power such as sexuality, ethnicity, religion, and class.¹⁸³ Analyzing the motivation, process, ramifications, and significances of Cho's personal stories and her bodily and vocal presence on stage, I put forward that she not only configures a queer dimension of Korean diaspora in the U.S., but also empowers the ethnic group of Korean Americans, particularly Korean American women, who are often stereotyped in—if not ostracized from—the various entertainment industries.

“Entertainment is politics and what I do is so important because I'm an Asian American woman and a gay and lesbian activist and all of these different minority groups wrapped into one person. [...] I'm trying to really represent my life as it is and to inspire other people to do the same.”¹⁸⁴ Cho invites audiences to become allies for marginalized groups of people by embracing their difference. This political and artistic allyhood in Cho's space becomes a force to change the racist, sexist, and heterosexist contexts of contemporary American society by laughing about those subjects that she attacks. Cho's creation of a cross-cultural coalition emits a disruptive counter-energy laughing against diverse forms of oppression about disempowered people. Laughter in this space is not just fleeting; it captures the moment to create a sustainable togetherness within the allyhood. Cho's disruptive force formulates an affective belonging for her audience as spect-allies

¹⁸³ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1, no. 8 (1989): 139–67.

¹⁸⁴ Margaret Cho, interview by Asia Society, *Asia Society*, accessed May 7, 2017, <http://asiasociety.org/margaret-cho-shes-one-she-wants>.

through three stages that I conceptualize as: first, cultural and personal identification; second, actualization through laughter; and last, festive community.

Cho opened her act talking about a number of American iconic celebrities and popular cultural products, creating a sense of togetherness among the audience of the *PsyCHO* show. The creation of the relationship between Cho and her audience reflects her efforts in the formulation of the baseline among her spect-allies. Cho goes further by calling out directly to the audience, asking very specific questions. In two moments in the show Cho asks the public: “where’s the Asian people?” And, later, after her performance about American cultural icons such as Joan Rivers, Elizabeth Taylor, and Montgomery Clift, she asks: “where are the fag-hags?” Most distinctively, she directly engages with some of the gay audience members in the first rows to exchange their thoughts on “eating pussy.” Calling out into the entire auditorium for individuated spectators or interacting directly with them to open up is an act of interpellation, and it is empowering to see her unashamed performance of race, gender, and sexuality as she dismantles the barrier between her as a performer and the collective anonymity of the auditorium, endowing her audience with a recognition. This identification resets the relationship of the theater as a communal spectacle; instead of Cho as a lone performer and a distanced audience, she sets up the “we” as spect-allies.

The spect-alliance in Cho’s stand-up comedy is the intersected ethnic, gender, and sexual belonging in the U.S., a transgressive belonging that becomes actualized through laughter in Cho’s embodiments of those identities. Jennifer Reed argues that “the creation of queer space allows the connection across unstable sexual categories. The use of humor allows a glimpse into our shared vulnerabilities. Together, they create a profoundly

humanizing context that allows us to feel a connection to those we share the laugh with.”¹⁸⁵ Building upon Reed’s ideas about humor, I argue that Cho’s comedy evokes laughter, which stimulates bodies, feelings, and cognition about the connection across the axis of uneven power relations within plural U.S. communities. Cho’s public’s laughter is her spectators’ endorsement of strong dissent against the normalization of silence that perpetuates uneven power relations; it also disseminates a strong consent to her subversive assertion of feminist thoughts through body and language. For Cho, laughter is a form of caring so that the so-called marginalized can be recognized, redressed, and empowered. Her act, which evokes laughter (or the act of laughter which evokes caring), amplifies the sense of togetherness. Comedy is the medium through which individuated audience members are identified as a collective “us” in between shared laughter. As a form of resistance that claims agency, acceptance, and freedom for people who have been deprived, laughter is positive, political, and powerful. Cho’s disruptive embodiments are the igniting points for the formation of affective belonging for “spect-allies” who become actualized through acts of laughing.

A community materializes at the end of Cho’s performance when she sings a song and invites her audience to sing along. Throughout the actual performance at the Gramercy Theater, Cho sang a number of different songs (that were edited out of the Netflix version), creating a feeling of festivity. The closing song (which is included in the online version) reintroduces her “Fat Pussy” stand-up routine from her performance with a song by the same name, one of the tracks in her 2017 Grammy-nominated album

¹⁸⁵ Jennifer Reed, “Sexual Outlaws: Queer in a Funny Way,” *Women’s Studies* 40, no. 6 (2011): 775-6.

American Myth. Analyzing the 2003 *Cho Revolution* performance, Rachel Lee theorizes what she calls the “pussy ballistics” of Cho’s stylistic repertoire raising “a critique of US empire that focuses on the Asian sex worker as logistical support for the military troops of commodity capitalism.”¹⁸⁶ This pussy ballistics envisions the interconnectedness between the personal state of a body and the political state of a societal system. The “Fat Pussy” song from Cho’s *PsyCHO* show is an example of pussy ballistics, especially in relation to contemporary fat/body politics in which the materiality of fatness and social pressure on one’s body shape produces unequal power dynamics among different bodies. Lee proposes that this pussy ballistics theory embodies “its values as a mode of pursuing feminist, queer, and racial studies critiques precisely through its roundabout technique—its refusing the straight path going directly to the point.”¹⁸⁷ Cho’s song is a roundabout method to not only disrupt body conformity and fat-shaming culture, but to also make fatness—which has often been erased in mainstream culture—visible in a celebratory musical language. Cho overtly encourages all the audience members to participate in the performance by singing along with her and her band, mostly by joining in the very easy to remember “Fat Pussy” refrain. Singing the funny song along with that funny woman maximizes the festive community among the spect-allies, forging a profoundly bonding experience: performing a utopic community. This communal ending leads the audience to feel the spect-allyhood, creating a sense of belonging in the here and now.

¹⁸⁶ Rachel Lee, “Pussy Ballistics and the Queer Appeal of Peristalsis, or Belly Dancing with Margaret Cho,” *GLQ* 20, no. 4 (2014): 493.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

Mournful Moving Body in Dohee Lee's *Mu/巫*

Dancer, choreographer, singer, musician, and performance artist Dohee Lee incorporates Korean shamanistic ritual elements in her performances as tools to reveal the lives and feelings of immigrants through her ritual-performance. Before coming to the United States in 2002, Lee studied Korean dance, vocals, music and percussion in a professional level of mastery in South Korea. As an artistic director and instructor, she has shared her artistic knowledge of Korean traditional art forms with American students by teaching Korean drumming and dance at the Korean Youth Cultural Center (2002-2008) and the Oakland Asian Cultural Center (2008-2011). She is currently faculty at Tamalpa Institute in Kentfield, California and has been recognized in her field through multiple awards and grants.¹⁸⁸ As a first-generation immigrant, Lee settled in the San Francisco Bay Area to start her new artistic journey experimenting with music, dance, ritual, and performance through her newly created Korean diasporic identity. In 2004, Lee launched the *Puri Project*, an experiment of multidisciplinary artworks with ritualistic elements as performance to envision the effect of healing. The word *puri* is the noun form for the verb *pul-da* meaning to untangle knotted things, conditions, and/or

¹⁸⁸ Among her many awards, Lee is the recipient of the Isadora Duncan Special Award (Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, 2008), New Music USA Project Grant (2016); Doris Duke Impact Award (2015), Honorary Fellowship of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation (2014), East Bay Community Foundation (2013), MAP Fund (2013), Creative Capital Award (2013), and several artist in residency grants. Dohee Lee, "About/bio," accessed March 24, 2018,

<http://www.doheele.com/HTML/About/bio.html>.

relationships. This can be applied to explain physical, psychological, or emotional conditions that become disentangled from one's suppressed or painful state, memory, and/or past.¹⁸⁹ Lee's *Puri* performance is her method to heal splintered relationships between people and nature and between people and community.¹⁹⁰ In her experimental artistic search for formulating a discourse on healing for this *Puri* Project, Lee created *SPoRa* in 2010 in which she uses a synthesized soundscape of inter-Asian experiences of wars to explore "themes of migration and the Asian diaspora within a context of international war."¹⁹¹ Collaborating with two other diasporic musicians, Japanese American Hiroyuki Jimi Nakagawa and Vietnamese American Van-Ahn Vanessa Vo, Lee creates a dialogic sonic space that connects the three nations (represented by each artist's ethnic origin) that experienced the Korean War, the Vietnam War, World War II (specifically in the Pacific), and U.S. militarization in their lands of origin. Each of the three musicians plays a variety of traditional musical instruments filtered through Lee's electronic sound mixer. Imagining wars, immigration, and healing expressed through their musical performance, these three diasporic artists with different ethnic backgrounds formed an ensemble for the sonic conversation of becoming an Asian diaspora based on the image of a dandelion that flies away and spreads its seed, as the title suggests: *SPoRa*.

¹⁸⁹ Hyun-soon Baek, "Sal-pu-ri Dance and a Philosophical Research on the Han," *Journal of Korean Dance* 27, no. 1 (2009): 52.

¹⁹⁰ Dohee Lee, "Projects," accessed January 7, 2018, <http://www.doheele.com/HTML/Projects/Projects.html>.

¹⁹¹ Dohee Lee, "SPoRa," accessed January 7, 2018, <http://www.doheele.com/HTML/Projects/Puri%20Project/SPoRa/SPoRa.html>.

Among her other works, Lee performs seasonal pieces to bring ritual into urban life when she views an urgent need, as the connection between nature and human life becomes severed.¹⁹² As an ongoing series of site-specific performance installations integrating Korean traditional music and dance, contemporary artistic practices, and audience interaction, these seasonal pieces are performed in both indoor and outdoor places such as museums, galleries, universities, and performance spaces of all sizes for the specific creation of spiritual care for a community.

Lee's birth place, Jeju Island, south of mainland South Korea, holds a special meaning for her as a Korean diasporic artist, especially in relation to the island's ongoing struggle with U.S. militaristic extension. Jeju has had a long history of witnessing battles for geopolitical power over East Asia since the Japanese colonial era. After the Japanese evacuation, the mainland of South Korea and Jeju were occupied by the U.S. military. In 1948, Korea was experiencing post-colonial upheaval in the middle of political battles that started to separate the country along an ideological line between Communism and the U.S.-backed implementation of capitalism.¹⁹³ When the U.S. military viewed Jeju as being pro-communist, a co-directed operation by U.S. military and pro-American South Korean government troops occurred from March 1, 1947 to April 3, 1948. This resulted in the massacre of up to eighty thousand civilians—almost one third of Jeju's

¹⁹² Dohee Lee, "Seasonal Rituals," accessed January 7, 2018, <http://www.doheele.com/HTML/Projects/Ara%20Gut.html>.

¹⁹³ Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 103.

population.¹⁹⁴ Even after the Korean War Armistice, the U.S. military continued its presence on Jeju, justifying the United States' position as a watchdog in East Asia. Starting in 2007, the Gangjeong village in Jeju became the center of attention when its inhabitants resisted the construction of a naval base for U.S. military use as it destroyed their livelihood, historical markers, and natural resources, thus dividing the regional community into two opposite groups: pro- and anti-U.S. naval base construction.¹⁹⁵ Even though civil organizations for the protection of nature and the demilitarization of East

¹⁹⁴ In South Korea, a number of cultural products have dealt with the Jeju April 3 Massacre. For example, the theater pieces 산사람들 (1949), 초혼 (1980), 앞산아 당겨라 오금아 밀어라 (2002), 지상 최후의 농담 (2015); novels 순이삼촌 (when this novel came out in South Korea in 1978 it was officially banned under dictator Park Chung-hee's government; since 2013, the theater version of this novel has been produced annually), 도령마루의 까마귀 (1978), 신화를 삼킨 섬 (2003); films: 무명천 할머니 (1983), 레드 헌트 1 (1997), 레드 헌트 2 (1999), 끝나지 않은 세월 (2005), 작은 연못 (2009), 꽃비 (2010), 지술 (2013), 비념 (2013); children's books: 다람쥐 오름의 슬픈 노래 (2003), 붉은 동백꽃 (2004), 테우리 할아버지 (2014), 나무도장 (2016); poetry: 수평선을 바라보며 (1979), 한라산 (1987), 이장 (1983); music: 잠들지 않는 남도 (1987); visual art: 강요배의 제주민중항쟁사 (this 1992 solo exhibition published an illustration book with paintings called 동백꽃지다), Korean adoptee artist Jane Jin Kaisen's *Reiterations of Dissent* (2011/16). Korean Japanese artists have also dramatized this massacre: Seok-beom Kim's novels such as 까마귀의 죽음 (1957) and 화산도 (1976-97) were translated and published in Korean in 1988; Eui-shin Jeong's play/film *Yakiniku Dragon* (2008/17).

¹⁹⁵ Sang-hun Choe, "Island's Naval Base Stirs Opposition in South Korea," *New York Times*, August 18, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/19/world/asia/19base.html>.

Asia protested the naval base project, its construction was completed in 2015. During those eight years of struggle (and still today) Lee has been one of the many activists protesting the U.S. militarization in Jeju and advocating for the demilitarization of South Korea.

For ten years in the U.S. and in Jeju, starting from 2004, Lee researched and developed her *MAGO* performance, which had its world premiere in November 2014 at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts. Lee states that “*MAGO* is a deeply personal work that begins with my life—the history and mythology of my home island, Jeju; the past and future lives of my ancestors; and the experience of being an immigrant female artist in the USA.”¹⁹⁶ Lee intended *MAGO* not only to console the spirit of the victims of the Jeju April 3 Massacre but also to seek a spiritual reconciliation through her ritual performance. In preparation for *MAGO*, Lee visited Jeju and the areas where the April 3 mass executions occurred. While walking through those killing fields, she noticed a massive number of crows that had nested there and that were incessantly cawing. In an interview, Lee said she felt that those crows were the only witnesses of the massacres remaining and that their ceaseless cawing was asking the question: “What can you see?” This encounter left a deep impression on her and inspired Lee to use the bird’s image for her *MAGO* performance in which she transforms herself into a crow as “a connector between land, ancestors, nature and [herself]” and interacts with her audience, asking

¹⁹⁶ Dohee Lee, “Interview,” *Doris Duke Performing Artist Awards*, accessed June 4, 2017, <http://ddpaa.org/artist/dohee-lee/>.

them what they see as they look at images of wars projected on a screen.¹⁹⁷ The legend of the creator goddess Mago in ancient Korean mythology is the driving factor of this performance as it reveals the heterogeneous connections between the personal and political, dreams and reality, past and present lives, microcosm and macrocosm. Crystal Mun-hye Baik writes that Lee “grapples with the militarized imperial enfiguration of contemporary Korea through a diasporic feminist standpoint. [...] Lee reconfigures Korean shamanistic practices to produce cross-racial affiliations and solidarities that exceed the material borders of Jeju Island and the Korean Peninsula.”¹⁹⁸ Building upon Baik’s conceptualization of *MAGO* as an artistic embodiment of a Korean transnational feminist stance for the decolonization of Korea, I analyze Lee’s 2017 *Mu* performance as a re-imagination of the belonging of diasporic subjects and communities in the United States through the act of embodying Korean shamanistic ritual elements. *Mu* is part of Lee’s ongoing *ARA—Waterways Time Weaves* project of participatory transdisciplinary dance/theater/ritual performance, incorporating elements of Korean shamanism, Korean traditional dance and music with electronic sound and visual images.

In her 2017 solo performance entitled *Mu*, which premiered in Los Angeles at the Roy and Edna Disney/CalArts Theater (REDCAT), Lee integrates her own creative imagination with a format derived from the traditional Korean shamanistic ritual (굿, *gut*),

¹⁹⁷ Dohee Lee, “Interview by Byron Au Yong,” *Creative Capital Blog – Artist-to-Artist Conversation Series*, November 5, 2014, <http://blog.creative-capital.org/2014/11/artist-artist-dohee-lee-byron-au-yong/>.

¹⁹⁸ Crystal Mun-hye Baik, “*MAGO* and Communal Ritual as Neocolonial Praxis: An Exchange with Dohee Lee,” *Verge: Studies in Global Asias* 2, no. 2 (2016): 4.

including music, costume, dance, and movement. This transformed shamanistic ritual performance employs the historical and ongoing stories of different immigrant groups in the U.S., more specifically the Bay Area Bhutanese Youth Group; the collective of immigrant, refugee, and artists called CoRazOn with which Lee is involved; and Korean American writer Teresa Hak Kyung Cha.¹⁹⁹ Through her shamanistic performance in *Mu*, Lee's mourning and moving body conveys the spirituality of Korean shamanism and the functions of shamans (무당, *mudang*) in a community as a connective tissue that, for her as a newly arrived immigrant to the United States, expresses the meanings of becoming part of a diaspora and formulates belonging in the United States.

In her book, *Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism*, Hyun-key Kim Hogarth writes that the most important function of the shaman is to mediate between “the supernatural and human worlds through utilizing trance/ecstasy states.”²⁰⁰ In this sense, shamans are intermediaries between spirits and humans. A shaman performs the ritual—a highly dramatic event—which includes complex traditional dancing, singing and drama, accompanied by elaborate costumes, musical instruments, and various paraphernalia. A skillful shaman makes contact with gods and spirits using mimetic gestures, music, dance, and visual symbols. Shamans are also performers, even entertainers, and carriers of traditional Korean culture. As performers of rituals, shamans are creative artists who

¹⁹⁹ Benjamin Michel, “Korean-Born Artist Raises Immigrant Voices Through Performance,” *KQED Arts*, March 21, 2017, <https://ww2.kqed.org/arts/2017/03/21/korean-born-artist-raises-immigrant-voices-through-performance/>.

²⁰⁰ Hyun-key Kim Hogarth, *Korean Shamanism and Cultural Nationalism* (Seoul: Jimoondang Publishing Company, 1999), 12.

can improvise words and actions reacting to the specific situation in which the *gut* occurs, and use their special abilities for the benefit of the everyday lives of their clients and the community. For Lee, as a mediating shaman, performing a ritual as an extraordinary organ of the community is significant in connecting myths between generations, between locations, and between individuals.

In Korea, the predominance of female shamans is a distinguishing feature of shamanism. Korean shamanism existed before the Joseon Kingdom (1392-1910). As a Confucian society, the Joseon Kingdom officially forbade any religious activities except for Confucian rituals, judging non-Confucian activities and particularly shamanistic rituals to be “superstitious practices” (음사, *eumsa*).²⁰¹ This one-belief system not only restricted the population to the rules of male-dominated Confucian rituals, but also marginalized women’s participation in shamanism. Although participants in shamanistic rituals were not limited to women, this marginalization of non-Confucian activities led mostly women to secretly participate in shamanistic activities. Over the centuries, because shamanism stood “outside of the boundaries of the Confucian social structure,” women participants relied on consultations with female shamans to deal with their private and emotional issues and gained personal power through shamanistic practices.²⁰² In the

²⁰¹ Martina Deuchler, “Propagating Female Virtues in Choson Korea,” in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, eds. Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush and Joan R Piggott (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 158.

²⁰² Janice C. H. Kim, “Processes of Feminine Power: Shamans in Central Korea,” in *Korean Shamanism: Revivals, Survivals, and Change*, ed. Keith Howard (Seoul: Seoul Press, 1998), 121.

post-colonial period of reconstructing the nation after independence from the Japanese colonial empire, South Korea as a modern nation-state tried to indoctrinate their indigenous cultures into a national form. To do so, the state purified the “contamination” of Japanese colonial influences on language, architecture, and the arts, rediscovering the “authenticity” of Koreanness in terms of Korean art forms, such as mask dance dramas, and even reinstating Korean shamanism as an original form of national culture unique in world history. During the 1970s, the inception of avant-garde theater movements accelerated the pace of resurrection of Korean ritualistic elements derived from shamanism by incorporating these into their theatrical forms.²⁰³ Even though Korean shamanism has received great attention from artists and scholars, the rapid Westernization, and especially Christianization, of South Korea influenced people’s reception of Korean shamanism as superstition. In this ever-changing reception of Korean shamanism, Lee’s performance is not just an instance of essentializing Korean national culture by using shamanistic performatives, but a springboard to articulate how the power of myths embedded in spirituality can possibly envision a future interconnecting the past and present of diasporic groups settled in North America.

Lee’s performance pieces are the rituals: a new way of performing Korean shamanistic rituals as a mythmaking process blending traditional Korean art with contemporary artistic elements. Furthermore, she answers her own question as to why ritual matters for her performance:

²⁰³ Dong-il Lee, “Ritual Transformation Techniques in *Kut* Performance Practices: Three Forms of Korean Shamanist Theatre—*Jeontong Kut*, *Tal Kut*, *Madang Kut*,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1994, 49.

In difficult times people have the tendency to congregate and find strength with each other and to free themselves from fear and doubts by participating in collective ceremonies. Rituals are complex and bring together different art forms into a cathartic experience. It carries the purpose of action and intention to form a link between the human, nature [sic] and spiritual realms.²⁰⁴

Mu is a ritual-performance particularly for the community of immigrants in North America. Locating herself as a shaman in the ongoing mythmaking process embracing all the people in the community, Lee blends ritual and performance in order to facilitate the artistic, emotional, and spiritual experiences of healing for her community audiences.

In *Mu*, Lee utilizes the Ara myth. Ara is the goddess of tears, and her name means “ocean” and “eye.” The story recounts that the goddess’s tears flowed down from her eyes and became rivers and oceans. They then floated up to become the twinkling stars in the Milky Way, each of the stars telling a story of emotion such as love, sorrow, desperation, and hope. Lee’s collaboration with community workshops, such as Community Health for Asian Americans (CHAA) based in Oakland, was an important factor in creating this performance, because her artistic materials are actual stories told by members of the community and collected through the workshops.²⁰⁵ On her investigation

²⁰⁴ Dohee Lee, “Statement,” accessed January 6, 2018, <http://www.doheele.com/HTML/About/Statment.html>.

²⁰⁵ Lee collaborated with one hundred multi-generational Asian immigrant women from more than ten backgrounds in conjunction with the Community Health for Asian Americans (CHAA) in Oakland. CHAA is a non-profit organization whose mission is to

of the waterways through their ancestral lineage, Lee states that the driving questions for the participants of the workshops to explore were: “what has happened to that land, nature, and people? What stories, myth and rituals have been created? Where have we come from and what remains?”²⁰⁶ As diasporic people in the U.S. working together on creating physical movements, drawing visual images, writing literary works like a poem, and singing a song, workshop participants searched for the connection between home, land, ocean, and body.

Starting with the section called “Chungsin: Prayer Song,” *Mu* has the following sections: “Weeping Song,” “Oguness,” and “Obangshinjang” (오방신장), and ends with the part called “Songsin.” The trio of *chungsin* (청신), *osin* (오신), and *songsin* (송신) is the archetypal structure of Korean shamanistic rituals.²⁰⁷ *Chungsin* means to call and welcome the god or spirit to come. Next, *osin* means to ask the spirit questions that the participants of the ritual are concerned about and listen to the spirit’s answer in the course of making the spirit happy with music and dance. Lastly, *songsin* means to send the spirit away to the place where it came from before being called. Lee’s performance changes this primary structure by having three different sections in the Osin partition: “Weeping

advance the lives of marginalized communities and particularly San Francisco and Oakland Bay Asian and Pacific Islander communities. See “MAP Fund | Dancers’ Group for Dohee Lee,” *MapFund*, accessed December 14, 2017, http://mapfund.org/grant_887.html.

²⁰⁶ Dohee Lee, “ARA Waterways,” accessed January 7, 2018,

http://www.doheele.com/HTML/Projects/Ara_waterways.html.

²⁰⁷ Lee, “Ritual Transformation Techniques in *Kut* Performance Practices,” 104.

Song,” “Oguness,” and “Obangshinjang.” Ohangshinjang is the Korean shamanistic deity of the five directions (east, west, north, south, and center), who protects land, people and spirits for a harmonious universe.

The ritual-performance begins with “Chungsin: Prayer Song” by showing a seashore video projection on the back screen of the theatre space as the audience hears the sounds of waves crashing on the shore. In the video, Lee appears frame left and slowly walks on the beach going toward the directly opposite side of the screen carrying a small hand-made ship over her head. At one point, a split section of the screen shows young immigrant women participants from the CHAA association who took part in her workshop making the boat that Lee carries over her head. This screen image of Lee walking along the seashore holding the boat interwoven with the images of these workshop participants who created it reveals Lee’s collaboration with diverse groups of female immigrants. The boat symbolizes diaspora to the United States with a history starting from the Pilgrims, the African slave trade, the waves of European immigrants, the Vietnamese boat people, to Haitian and Cuban asylum seekers. Lee, then, appears on stage and performs a Korean traditional dance called *sal-puri* (살풀이) in a diagonal direction toward the audience. *Sal-puri* is a traditional slow dance form, based on Korean shamanistic beliefs. In Korean, the word *sal* means negative spirits or energy, and the term *puri* means to release or relieve; the *sal-puri* dance is thus a dance to release the negative spirits or energy. Lee dances this piece manipulating long colorful cloth strips instead of utilizing a single white cloth that is customarily used in the traditional dance form. This dance suggests a symbolic tribute to diasporic people in the United States who have moved across the waves, attempting to untangle their negative feelings and energy.

Particular to Korean culture is the concept of *han*, a psychological and emotional negative energy associated with Korean people who have been oppressed by the brutal reality of the hardships of life. Jung-soon Shim specifically defines *han* as evoking a “pervasive sense of sorrow, traditionally in need of shamanistic purging in the spirits of the dead, but also describing the sense of national trauma induced first by the Japanese occupation, then by the post-war division of the country.”²⁰⁸ In her performance, Lee

²⁰⁸ Jung-Soon Shim, “The Shaman and the Epic Theatre: the Nature of Han in the Korean Theatre,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 20, no. 3 (2004): 216. There is no clear agreement about what *han* is among many scholars across different academic backgrounds. Young-hee Lee defines *han* as “a representative characteristic of Korean culture, which means a mental state in which hurt feelings are trapped in the mind.” Sang-jin Choi explains *han* to be “the Koreans’ national sentiment and the collective symbol of Korean people.” Grace M. Cho states that *han* is “accumulated grief and rage,” JaHyun Kim Haboush writes of “unrequited sorrow,” and Laurel Kendall defines it as “unfulfilled desires.” See Young-hee Lee, *Ideology, Culture, and Han: Traditional and Early Modern Korean Women’s Literature* (Seoul: Jibmoondang Publishing Co., 2002), 33; Sang-jin Choi, *Hankukin Shimlihak (Psychology of the Korean People)* (Seoul: Chungang University Press, 2000), 76; Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 25; JaHyun Kim Haboush, “Versions and Subversions: Patriarchy and Polygamy in Korean Narratives,” in *Women and Confucian Cultures in Premodern China, Korea, and Japan*, edited by Dorothy Ko, JaHyun Kim Haboush, and Joan R. Piggott (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 282; Laurel Kendall, *The Life and Hard Times of a Korean*

incorporates Korean shamanistic rituals to purge *han* (한) that is entangled with people beyond the Korean diaspora. After finishing her dance, she takes off her cloak and sits center stage. She then unrolls a long scroll, which is attached to her skirt, spreads it toward the audience and reads a Korean poetic statement (non-translated for the audience). This poem recalls her diasporic experience of following her dreams of coming to a new land along the waterways but experiencing a number of losses such as her language and culture when becoming a diasporic subject. Her statement connects with the stories of the female immigrant workshop participants who created the boat seen in the video. In this trio of video, dance, and poem, Lee's body functions as a medium to deliver the stories of becoming diaspora interrelated with different groups of immigrants and intersected with historical and literary imagination.

The interface between various digital media such as sound, film, and animation and Lee's live performance dancing, singing, reciting poetry, and playing percussion is distinctive in *Mu*, as the beginning of the performance juxtaposes action on the video screen with Lee's dancing and reciting a poem on stage. In the following section called "Weeping Song," Lee sits center stage constantly chanting the phrase "Ah-e-gho" (아이고) which is the Korean expression of one's mournful state. The projected video on the background screen shows a woman in a white Korean traditional garment in a cave-like space who tries to pull out from the ground a long white thread that seems to have no end. The simultaneity of the actions on stage and on screen create a sense that the acts of weeping and pulling the thread from the ground are parallel actions that reinforce the two

Shaman: Of Tales and the Telling of Tales (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988),

women's relationship to one another. In an interview, Lee clarifies this part of the performance by stating that "the projected image on the background screen is a sound-image for the weeping song."²⁰⁹ According to Lee, foregrounding the sound-image of weeping conveys to the audience how what begins as a non-empathetic state can be unsettled, stirred, and stimulated, so that empathetic communication can emerge, which is why so often "it is possible for us to talk and communicate with each other only after crying."²¹⁰ This intensified act of mourning not only causes the destabilization of relationships among people, history, and/or nature, but also allows a new understanding of their interconnectedness. This "Weeping Song" portion ends with the sound of water dripping in a puddle, the soundscape giving the dreary impression to the audience in the dark auditorium of being in a cave.

Next, the "Oguness" part begins with Lee speaking in an untranslatable language accompanied by small hand movements. The sound of her language echoes, repeated by a wireless device that she wears that communicates with the sound system, as if the soundscape formulates a constant wave to reach the point of ultimate communication. According to Lee, this language is a "scored language" that, like a leitmotif, embodies a theme but also an intention. This ambiguous language that she created functions as a "universal" connector across different worlds of culture, people, and spirit. This "Oguness" part also synthesizes the spatialization of the sound and the acoustics of the space. The stage floor is decorated with the projected abstract image that constantly moves following Lee's direction and changes shape reacting to Lee's sound. The moving

²⁰⁹ Dohee Lee, interview by author, Los Angeles, April 27, 2017.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

images are composed of abstract lines and forms like waves with peaks and troughs in accordance with her movements and sounds. The sound resonance of her language and the image waves on the floor are in constant motion, creating a chaotic mood until both sound and image subside. This ever-mutating form of lingual, sonic, and visual frenzy reflects Lee's artistic message that order comes out of disorder. The disruptive and chaotic energy actualized through the ensemble of the scored language, sounds, movements, and images has a potential that can initiate a fresh mind, rejuvenated spiritual state, and positive future. This process discloses how worlds regenerate into harmonious communities in which nature and human; past, present, and future; the spiritual and the worldly freely communicate thus imagining a utopic coexistence. This part of her performance was particularly affective, generating an almost unbearable intensity on the spectators as sound, light, and motion reached their pinnacle of confusion before declining into calmness.

The intercultural experiment in the "Oguness" part of the performance, which is influenced by Yoruba traditional rituals, brings out the question of the assumed universality of myth across Asia and Africa, here represented by Korean shamanistic ritual and African Yoruba ritual. In an interview, Lee states that she was introduced to this particular culture from the West African ethnic group, mostly in southwestern and north-central Nigeria and southern and central Benin, by sharing artistic works with a colleague whose pieces are based on Yoruba rituals.²¹¹ The configuring of a ritualistic connection across Korean shamanism and Yoruba ritual culture is intriguing but felt less powerful than the previous sections in her performance focused on Korean cultures.

²¹¹ Lee, interview by author.

Conceivably, the act of inserting the different cultural text with the historical and social implications of performing Yoruba rituals lost some of its cultural specificities as compared to Lee's expertise of Korean shamanist ritual performing arts. This points out the possible precarity of intercultural performance and its dependence on the perspectives of artists, audiences, and scholars.²¹² Moreover, Lee explains the process of creating this intercultural section by stating that both Korean shamanism and Yoruba rituals have gender differences in terms of energy—but with the female spirit in both cultures considered less important and not powerful enough to be recognized. To reverse this inequity, Lee creates the Goddess Oguness instead of the God Ogun.²¹³ In the dichotomous view of gendered spirit either male or female, Lee asserts that the view of the female spirit should be transformed by highlighting the strength in the feminine side of the spirit.²¹⁴ An accent on feminine spirituality is welcomed, however a rebalance of gender power dynamics would be more significant in terms of a positive message of

²¹² Cláudia Tatinge Nascimento, *Crossing Cultural Borders through the Actor's Work: Foreign Bodies of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 4.

²¹³ Ogun is one of several West African gods whose image carries a sense of duality, as Sandra T. Barnes writes: “the one is a terrifying specter: a violent warrior, fully armed and laden with frightening charms and medicines to kill his foes. The other is society's ideal male: a leader known for his sexual prowess, who nurtures, protects, and relentlessly pursues truth, equity, and justice.” Sandra T. Barnes, *Africa's Ogun: Old World and New* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2.

²¹⁴ Lee, interview by author.

redress in order to redefine womanhood in a non-patriarchal power structure in which hegemonic masculinity rules.

During the “Obangshinjang” segment, Lee appears on stage wearing a multi-colored skirt and a helmet topped by a white peony flower seemingly opening and closing whenever she moves. According to Lee, she carefully comes up with costume design ideas through inspirational activities such as research on Korean Buddhist murals and meditations. The helmet originates from Korean traditional music performed by and for farmers who wear a hat with a peony flower called *bhu-pho* (부포). The hat in Lee’s performance is replaced with a helmet that is usually worn by a shaman who wants to make contact with a male warrior spirit. The skirt is made of many pieces of multi-color paper creating layers like a delicate lace skirt. Lee invented the idea for the design of this costume herself and collaborated with ritual wear designer Dana Kawano, who materialized Lee’s vision for the outfit. In the immigrant women’s workshop at CHAA, Lee asked the participants to write their feelings of anger on a piece of paper. These writings then became part of the colorful skirt as a collection of written expressions of anger that dwell in immigrant women’s experiences in the U.S. The costume is thus not just a decorative adornment for the visual embellishment of the performance, it is also an important signifier of an emotional state of anger waiting to be purged by Lee’s performance.

In this section of the performance, Lee executes a dance that can be recognized as one from Korean shamanistic rituals by the beating of a small Korean traditional gong called *kkwenggwari* (꽝과리). As the title of this section of her performance indicates (“Obangshinjang,” Korean shamanistic deity of the five directions), Lee greets and

blessees each of the five directions of the stage. After briskly crossing the stage vigorously beating the gong, she breaks the fourth wall by talking directly to the audience members as an actual shaman would. As Lee's shamanistic activities take over, the performer-audience relationship changes. Supposedly, a successful shaman is able to merge her feelings with her participants and create a trans-personal sense of aliveness and vitality. When this fusion occurs, the spiritual worlds within the audience can help them solve their problems. As Lee addresses the spectators, she asks them to imagine how each of their lives is entangled with and shares numerous and similar struggles that are all connected due to the lack of spirituality. She then asks the audience why they are here tonight: Why did they come to this performance and what do they want to get out of it? The passive audience members do not answer, undoubtedly due to the fact that they seem to view themselves as theatre spectators not shamanist participants. Laurel Kendall describes Korean shamanistic rituals, in which she herself participated, as exhilarating, adding that "it refreshes the insides" and creates a sense of excitement or joy, which ends in a "dreamy euphoria that rises up from the belly to the chest."²¹⁵ Obviously, the setting of an actual shaman's ritual is different from that of an artist's shamanistic ritual-performance, such as the REDCAT Theatre in downtown Los Angeles, but Lee's particular aura and energy was still able to draw out a higher degree of participation. Undaunted by the initial lack of enthusiastic response from her audience, Lee repeatedly and forcefully asked the audience: "Do you want to be happy and free?" until the

²¹⁵ Laurel Kendall, "Of Gods and Men: Performance, Possession, and Flirtation in Korean Shaman Ritual," *Cahiers d'Extreme Asie* 6 (1991): 58.

audience's level of energy finally became a collective force loudly answering her question with a resounding "Yes!"

Lee sees her audience members' lives as being filled with the circulation of invisible negative energy and personal problems until they are cleansed by participating in a ritual. She believes that through her ritual-performance her audience members would be able to reach a better stage in their lives without emotional knots. In an interview, Lee points out that "the first thing that hits me is seeing the people—afraid to cry, afraid of screaming, afraid of their emotions. [...] I want them to feel it is not shameful, it is OK to feel these things. I do that through my body. I become the instrument and let the people there play me."²¹⁶ The primary purpose of embodying a shamanistic ritual-performance is to unleash one's knotted bitterness, frustration, or resentment. Shamans mainly concentrate on performing the ritual to treat the knotting in the mind, the body, and between human beings, but spoken through another voice or medium. As a trans-personal medium, the shaman is ultimately actualized into an invisible power, stimulated by the active connection between a certain spiritual voice and the participant. For Lee, becoming a mediating shaman in her ritual-performance has a clear purpose to connect by breaking the barrier between the audience and herself, cracking open the silence, and getting the audience members to speak up.

In the last segment of the performance, called "Songsin," Lee performs a special ritual dedicated to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, a 1.5-generation Korean American woman

²¹⁶ Dohee Lee, Interview by Rachel Howard, *SFGate*, January 15, 2014,

<http://www.sfgate.com/performance/article/ARA-Gut-South-Korea-roots-move-dancer-Dohee-Lee-5146167.php>.

writer who was raped and murdered in 1982 in New York City. On her website, Lee expresses her sympathy about Cha's tragic death and the extent of Cha's influence on her own art and life "as a woman, artist, daughter, sister, as an Asian immigrant person," and how Lee had strongly connected to Cha in a spiritual way "through art, performance, space, time, memories, magic, mysticism, ritualistic, poems, words, screen and abstractions."²¹⁷ Throughout this ending, a silent video plays on the screen while Lee on stage plays a collection of Korean traditional percussion instruments, mainly drums. In Korean shamanism, shamans use songs, dances and musical instruments including drums and bells incorporating a wide repertoire of Korean traditional music. Their drums, bells, and rattles not only function to summon spirits, but also enable the shaman to concentrate and maintain contact with the spirit world. Lee creates a startling live effect on the audience as she conjures the video images through her music and sounds. The action shown on the video was filmed in New York City on November 5, 2016, the exact month and day that Cha was raped and murdered thirty-four years earlier.²¹⁸ In this video, Lee wears a white garment, in a Korean traditional costume style, on which Cha's monumental literary work, *Dictee*, was written. *Dictee* crosses different literary and visual genres such as poetry, photography, autography, and drawing. It is a postmodern

²¹⁷ Dohee Lee, "Remembering her Death and life," *ARA/PURI ARTS*, October 16, 2016, http://puriproject.tumblr.com/post/151884446347/remembering-her-death-and-life-this-woman-whose?is_related_post=1.

²¹⁸ See Amei Wallach, "Theresa Cha: In Death, Lost And Found," *New York Times*, April 19, 2003, <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/20/arts/art-architecture-theresa-cha-in-death-lost-and-found.html>.

text that merges diverse forms of languages, histories, and cultures in conjunction with stories of becoming a Korean female diasporic subject in a new foreign home and episodes of Korea's history of independence movement and ongoing struggle of gaining civil rights.²¹⁹ Discussing Cha and other diasporic artists, Laura Hyun-Yi Kang explains that their works resonate with “recurring tensions between an expressed desire for this ‘home’ and a historically sobered acknowledgement of its manifold inaccessibility.”²²⁰ In *Dictee*, Cha mixes different languages, French, English, and Chinese characters, and purposefully eliminates punctuation to express this untranslatable tension between the personal experience of her displacement from home and the socio-political history of her homeland. In Lee's performance, each line of Cha's text was inscribed on a long piece of cloth, and the cluster formed by these lines from the text resembled white bird feathers. In this costume, Lee visits the actual location where Cha was murdered, the place where she lived and worked, and the place where her last exhibition was to occur just before her death. The showing opened as scheduled but as a memorial ceremony for Cha. In each location, Lee dances to console Cha's spirit, which presumably is still attached to these places. Lee's ritual-performance for purging Cha's *han* is an actualization of Cha's art, life, and death in the dance-like shamanistic ceremony or shamanistic ritual-like dance performance for her spirit. At the back entrance of the building where Cha was murdered, Lee uses her entire body in a brushing movement as if attempting to draw out Cha's spirit

²¹⁹ Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

²²⁰ Laura Hyun-Yi Kang, “Re-Membering Home,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, eds. Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 250.

from the haunted area. For the audience in the theater, the disruptive force in Lee's dance on video awakens the forgotten stories of injustice perpetrated, not just against Cha, but also against unknown diasporic women victims of such crimes in the U.S. Lee's video ritual performance functions both to appease Cha's spirit and to call attention to women immigrants' history through the memory of urban spaces in New York City.

In the video, the public disruption that Lee creates by dancing and performing this ritual on the New York City sidewalks attracts a street audience. The theatre audience, in the present of the performance, is now not only watching Lee on stage playing percussion but also watching the on-lookers in the video watching and reacting to Lee in the video. This mixing of past and present is a way for Lee to connect time and space and makes the theater spectators realize how they exist in this spatial and temporal continuum that Lee's ritual-performance attempts to achieve. Through her multidisciplinary artistic experiments with music, dance, visual art, technology, and rituals, Lee disrupts the Newtonian notion that time and space are separate. She exposes the messages in which not only are one's homeland and one's new land for a new life virtually connected, but one's ancestral time and present lifetime are linked as well. A connected past and present thus envisions a future in a continuum of time and space. Her *Mu* ritual-performance leads her audience to the metaphysical level of seeing and feeling the spirit of diaspora in the United States. Through Korean shamanistic practices, Lee formulates a critical conversation between her and her audience in the invisible realm of the spiritual belonging of diaspora.

Lastly, *Mu* is not only about forging a sense of belonging but also very much about freedom: trying to free Cha's spirit from the space of her death; trying to free her

audiences from fear and doubt. Lee herself stated that one of the reasons she left Korea was to be free from traditional Korean music and dance forms.²²¹ As part of the Korean diaspora, Lee wants to use the knowledge she gained from her Korean shamanistic roots to help bring this sense of freedom to other diasporic people—which, in a way, includes all Americans who are not native to this land—and create a regenerated harmonious world, thus echoing Dolan’s thought that “performing across cultural identities in the formalized space of theater might provoke utopian performatives that offer glimpses of how people might be together in a more respectful, care-full, loving human community, however small or large those configurations might be.”²²² Thus, Lee’s act of comforting and freeing Cha’s spirit entangled in New York City is a gesture toward the regeneration of a new harmonious and utopic future for diaspora.

Comparing Cho and Lee reveals several shared aspects of their works: both stimulate audience participation in their performances, both perform and advocate for a distinct public, who are present, and both directly engage with diasporic experiences and belonging. By means of their body as a medium, both Korean American women artists’ performances of Korean cultural identities unveil the affective potential for the creation of utopic communities where their ethnic culture merges with queer sexuality and shamanistic spirituality. The comparison is worth noting in contrast to the following female performance artist, Miru Kim, who acts as a counter-example. Her work—although not addressing a specific community, not performed with or to a live audience,

²²¹ Adam Fong, “Chapter One Dohee Lee 2017,” *The Herb Alpert Award in the Arts*, accessed October 8, 2017, <http://herbalpertawards.org/artist/chapter-one-5>.

²²² Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 64.

and not intending to present a Korean diasporic subjectivity—still resonates on the level of diasporic displacement and estrangement, and immense concern for disenfranchised people.

Pensive Posing Body in Miru Kim's *Naked City Spleen*

Visual and performance artist Miru Kim, in a 2008 series of photographs entitled *Naked City Spleen*, presented her naked body in abandoned spaces such as tunnels, factories, subways, catacombs, and shantytowns in Seoul, New York, Istanbul, Paris, and many other places.²²³ Unlike Cho and Lee's active engagement with Korean cultural experiences and practices to create their artistic works, Kim does not bring any Korean cultural signifiers into her photographed site-specific performances; just her naked body. Ben Gibberd points out that "the effect is powerful [...] because her nakedness seems to emphasize her human vulnerability."²²⁴ This vulnerability and strong sense of liberation at the same time can be felt in a shot of Kim taken from the top of the vast abandoned Michigan Central Station in Detroit almost completely engulfing her faraway naked body in the derelict rubble-laden space. In the Richmond Power Station in Philadelphia, a bird's eye view of Kim shows her grasping with both hands at a huge rusty turbine surrounded by many others that stretch outward from all sides of the frame. She looks

²²³ The *Naked City Spleen* series exhibited at the Gestarc Gallery in Brooklyn, New York in 2008; at the Gallery HYUNDAI Gangnam in Seoul, Korea and the Cell Theatre in New York City in 2009; and at the SODA Gallery in Istanbul, Turkey in 2010.

²²⁴ Ben Gibberd, "Children of Darkness," *New York Times*, July 29, 2007, http://www.nytimes.com/2007/07/29/nyregion/thecity/29shad.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0.

very much as if the industrial spaces have entrapped her—in her primal state of nakedness—within the materials such as steel, concrete, bricks, and cement. In a 2008 TED Talk, Kim explained the reason for her nakedness in her works: “I decided against clothing because I wanted the figure to be without any cultural implications or time-specific elements. I wanted a simple way to represent a living body inhabiting these decaying, derelict spaces.”²²⁵ Here, I view Kim’s Asian/Korean body as a culture-specified bodily text that rewrites the meanings of spaces, diaspora, and belonging, not as the universal signifier that Kim thinks her body becomes (without any cultural artifacts such as clothing, make-up, or artificial backdrops).

Reckoning the uneasiness of categorizing her work only as a work of photography parallels Peggy Phelan’s interpretation of Cindy Sherman’s performance art, which exists as a form of photography. Analyzing photographs and other forms of art that represent the relationship between the self and the other, Phelan states that “examining the politics of the exchange of gaze across these diverse representational mediums leads to an extended definition of the field of performance.”²²⁶ Pointing out the significance of gaze accentuating the performativity of represented images, Phelan views photography as participating in a performative exchange and defines Sherman’s photographed

²²⁵ Miru Kim, “My Underground Art Explorations,” Presentation, *TED EG Conference*, Monterey 2008, https://www.ted.com/talks/miru_kim_s_underground_art/transcript?language=en.

²²⁶ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 4.

performance art as a “condensation of narrative within the single frame.”²²⁷ She also states that Sherman’s works generate commentaries about femininity that is constructed, staged, and contested through imitative pose. Within the performative aspects of generating a narrative and comment on identity, society, and community, I regard Miru Kim’s photographed works as a performance that brings about conceptual changes in terms of the relationship between space and body, especially diasporic women’s bodies in public spaces where they have been disenfranchised by ubiquitous capitalistic forces.

Kim is an American-born artist who was raised in South Korea until the age of thirteen. She then moved to the United States, where she went to school and now lives and works. Kim’s distinctive transnational mobility encompasses a broad spectrum: from her nationality as an American citizen, her upbringing and family background rooted in Korea, and her experience as a highly educated contemporary diasporic person in the U.S., to her border-crossing artistic activities and exhibitions all over the world. As a diasporic wanderer in urban spheres worldwide, her position cannot simply be explained in the categorical term of an ethnic group in the United States: Korean American. The complexity of her identity not only contests the act of categorizing her in a single identification as an artist, but also reveals her embodiment of these experiences of displacement through her art works. The recent comparatively flexible transnational mobility between South Korea and the U.S. and the globalization phenomenon have generated a number of different formations of Korean diasporic groups of people temporarily or potentially permanently becoming American residents. Kim’s border-crossing position as a moving and traveling diasporic body, not revealing any ethnic signs

²²⁷ Phelan, *Unmarked*, 62.

of Korean culture in her works of art, is part of an eccentric formation of diasporic subjectivity within her life trajectory in which she searches to create new relationships with spaces on a world-wide scale.

Kim's performance works dismantle the dualistic relationships between naked body and space, human and animal, and life and lifelessness. In *Naked City Spleen* she positions her naked body in a seemingly lifeless space in urban areas. At the time of Kim's *Naked City Spleen* series, she was wandering in urban spheres, but her later work moved first into rural settings (interacting with pigs in hog farms) then into what might be termed "nature" (deserts in two continents). For her live performance entitled *I Like Pigs and Pigs Like Me* as part of Primary Projects at Art Basel Miami 2011, she spent a continuous 104 hours in a makeshift pen with two pigs.²²⁸ This live performance was based on her earlier photography project called *The Pig That Therefore I Am* (2011)—created after her *Naked City Spleen* series—featuring a series of photographs of her naked self in close contact with a number of pigs at industrial hog farms. More recently, she spent 2012 and 2013 travelling through a number of deserts such as the Arabian Desert; the Sahara in Morocco, Mali, and Egypt; and the Gobi Desert in Mongolia. In these vast and empty spaces where nude human bodies are unlikely to be seen, she photographed her naked body interacting with camels in her series entitled *The Camel's*

²²⁸ Amanda McCorquodale, "Art Basel Miami 2011: Miru Kim's 'The Pig That Therefore I Am' Exhibit (EXPLICIT PHOTOS)," *Huffington Post*, December 1, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/01/art-basel-miami-2011-muri-kim_n_1124033.html. See also a video of this live performance on Kim's website: <http://mirukim.com/i-like-pigs/>.

Way. In an urban setting, first in Croatia and then in Switzerland, Kim theatricalized a public space for the *City Dreaming* project (2014-2015), in which she slept naked in a bed placed in the middle of a bustling city street. The common strategy in the course of her numerous photographed site-specific performances is the contentious use of her naked body and public space. The correlation between her body and space does more than create friction against the normative perception of a naked female body within a cityscape or landscape; it also evokes the affective stakes involved in the desire to act, from Kim's perspective, and the desire to gaze at something forbidden to watch in a public space, from an onlooker's point of view. It should be noted that Kim's neo-liberal body capital has a privilege in terms of transnational mobility in the current neo-exclusion era of travel bans and immigration restrictions. The commoditization of her eccentric body/space can also be seen as a privilege as she offers for sale limited editions of her photographic artwork such as postcards.²²⁹

The history of art's use of the female body reveals how women's bodies have been entangled in a critical relationship with Western society and its cultures. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir have stated that women have been defined as the "other," which characterized women as secondary and inferior to men's transcendental state of being.²³⁰ This mechanism of making women the "other" has contributed to the sexist ideology that associates women only with their bodily states. According to Laura

²²⁹ The Naked City Spleen Limited Edition Print Set is listed on Miru Kim's official website at the price of \$450.00. <http://mirukim.com/store/nakedcityspleenset>.

²³⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2011), 6.

Mulvey, women's body as image is easily subjected to the male gaze for men's pleasure.²³¹ This "to-be-seen-ness" of women's body in visual culture, especially photography, reproduces women's silence by fetishizing the materiality of their body in a frame merely to satisfy men's pleasure. In particular, visual culture has perpetuated the imbalanced dynamics between male as the subject creating an image and female as an object to be the image, continuing the dehumanizing practice of making women "othered" objects for somebody's artistic appreciation. Reacting against the problematic orientation toward men's gaze and the hierarchical relation between women as objects and men as artists, a number of feminist performance artists have actively engaged with these underlying problems and challenged a male-dominated view of art by using a female body as a tool for their feminist intervention in art. For example, nude performance art works by Carolee Schneemann and Marina Abramović (who denies being a feminist) and some early works of photographed performances by Yayoi Kusama contested the concept of a female nude body as a sexualized object, a beauty norm, or a reference to nature, and demanded the bodily component as and for their own voices. When discussing Carolee Schneemann's nude works, Rebecca Schneider states that "nudity was not the problem. [...] The agency of the body displayed, the author-ity of the agent—that was the problem with women's work."²³² The assertiveness with which the

²³¹ Mulvey's argument was particularly directed toward mainstream Hollywood cinema and especially classic Hollywood cinema. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18.

²³² Rebecca Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 35.

women artists take a fearless stance for their own artistic fervor reveals the subversive force with which these artists' works drastically reverse the compulsive normativity of what a female body should be, how it should behave, and its place in society in general. The key strategy of these artists is to shatter the rigidity of patriarchy and sexism rooted everywhere, particularly in a male-dominated if not male-controlled artistic world. Kim's *Naked City Spleen* project situates itself in this genealogy of women artists' engagement with the female body, particularly with a woman's naked body as an assertive tool for the creation of art. In her photographic method, Kim is both subject and artist and is the sole decision-maker. She alone sets up her camera, deciding on the frame, and then sets up the subject (herself) in several poses that she chooses, as the self-timing mechanism automatically takes the photos. On certain occasions, Kim has someone else press the shutter but without moving the camera. She thus asserts active agency for her own voice within the self-reflexive and self-directorial frame in the process of formulating free bodily movement. Having full autonomy and authority over her art-making process, Kim's choices for each site in which she inserts her body in the hidden metropolitan spaces reveal her assertive status as a diasporic woman, situating women unrestrained in any space anywhere in the world.

In the *Naked City Spleen* series, Kim explores the ruins of industrial structures and municipal constructions in several cities across the globe. The idea for her work started with a deep feeling of loneliness among the crowds of people and searching for an empty space. As Kim stated in an interview: "these places are kind of like deserts within the city, it's like a cleansing, there's kind of a cathartic feeling when you go [...] into these abandoned places, places that are desolate, forgotten from the average city

people.”²³³ After Kim became involved with people who called themselves urban explorers and trespassed into these places for a new type of inner-city adventure, she eventually branched out on her own and decided to create visual performances in these spaces. Kim chose the title of her work to connect at first New York City with Charles Baudelaire’s collection of poems, *Paris Spleen* (1869), which for Kim illustrates Paris as a rapidly increasing industrialized urban center that created feelings of anxiety, isolation, and depression.²³⁴ Her *Naked City Spleen* series is not just about placing a naked body in a barren space, but to make her bodily insertion generate the intimacy of an affective communion between the bare and dead space and the naked human body, between the audience and her work, and between the audience and their relationship with space. Edward Soja writes that at the center of spatial exploration is a “revived interest in the body as the most intimate of personal-and-political spaces, an affective microcosm for all other spatialities.”²³⁵ In this sense, Kim’s body is itself a space and performs an explicit resistance against the dualistic separation between live human and dead space. As Kim infiltrates the deep innards of urbanscapes, her intimate contact with the skins of the spaces, buildings, and materials materializes her visual imagination of space with its flesh and bones of urban organisms.

Kim is very aware of how her nude art is differently looked upon depending on the gender of her viewers. She especially understands that some male viewers consider

²³³ Miru Kim, interview by author, New York City, March 8, 2016.

²³⁴ Ibid.

²³⁵ Edward Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 112.

her art as a superficial or even pornographic display of a naked woman's body; however, she states, "it's pretty obvious that the poses are [...] not even fashion. It's very different from kind of 'fashiony' type shoots where it's about making the woman, the female body into a kind of object, sexual object. It's like pretty obvious that it's not like that, so most people understand that; I mean, even Bedouins understood it."²³⁶ Kim's engagement with spaces in her photographed performance is different from fashion magazines' use of these kinds of urban spaces as their photo-shoot backgrounds. Fashion magazines tend to exploit the usefulness of the discarded spaces to promote the potential financial profit from the products and/or services featured in the photographs, such as clothes, jewelry, beauty products, and/or hairstyles. Kim, on the other hand, in her state of nothingness, communicates with the materiality of the spaces on the same level of bareness, suggesting a possibility of coexistence, not a form of exploitation. For her works, Kim always chooses "dead" spaces to "animate and humanize"—spaces that were once full of people and then abandoned or forgotten by people but still full of memories and histories—thus offering a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness.²³⁷

The fact that most of her locations in the *Naked City Spleen* series are dilapidated industrial spaces implies a particular implicit criticism of a capitalistic system that spends massive amounts of time, money, and energy building huge structures as profit-making enterprises only to desert them when a profit can no longer be made. Kim's site-specific performances accentuate a sense of alienation caused by this capitalistic system of exploitation, expansion, and abandonment. Particularly in her photographed performance

²³⁶ Kim, interview by author.

²³⁷ Gibberd, "Children of Darkness."

at the Moraenae demolition/construction site in Seoul, Kim's subtle criticism of the capitalistic exploitation of space and the exclusion of human occupants stands out. In one particular photograph, Kim, her naked back to us, is precariously perched on top of the crumbling wall of an old-fashioned, one-level tiled house, surrounded by rubble from other already destroyed small houses. Her face, away from us, is directed toward a mass of high-rise buildings in the near distance with only a wasteland separating her from them, as if waiting for this army of modern buildings to attack her and the three lone small houses that are left. The slightly low angle emphasizes the power of the modern high-rises, and the frame implies that these buildings not only reach up to the sky but endlessly continue to the left and right. One feels that it is only a matter of time—and a short time at that—for Kim and her small, already beaten-down structures to be completely overtaken and overwhelmed by the forces of money-driven spatial politics. Through her photo, Kim also captures an awareness of the ephemeral quality of the high-rise building, especially South Korean apartments that are shoddily built, like chicken coops, and eventually have to be torn down and rebuilt: “these [demolition] scenes reminded me that the sense of security offered by man-made shelters is fragile and fugitive. The high-rise apartment buildings will someday meet the same fate of being evacuated and demolished.”²³⁸ Thus, Kim's action of inserting her naked body in this demolition zone in Seoul extends an act of tacit disturbance against the never-ending cyclical process of capitalistic destruction and construction. Under the banner of urban renewal, numerous spaces have vanished forever and are not remembered at all, while other spaces are waiting to be destroyed and disappear. Even more disturbing are the

²³⁸ Kim, “Populating My Solitude.”

ways that human dwellers can be expelled at any time. Appallingly, a sense of homogeneity of space has become the so-called “modern” aesthetic for these cities under the guise of profit-making and efficiency. Alienating the have-not people from space and exterminating the spaces of the have-nots maintains the constant sense of a new urban chic in cities.

The heartlessness of this type of urban planning is a global phenomenon in which countless spaces have been discarded in the process of producing “new” structures of space depriving native occupants of their homes in the name of making “better” spaces: the process of gentrification. In South Korea, due to rapid industrialization and subsequent urbanization, metropolitan cities such as Seoul have continuously needed more space for incoming residents; however, even though there has been a decrease of incoming population since the late 2000s, real estate prices have continued to soar due to speculation. There have been a number of legal reforms and policy implementations to regulate this speculation, particularly in Seoul, but none of them have deterred it. These regulations were also primarily put into place to stabilize the real estate market, not to create more affordable and sustainable living environments. Moreover, ceaseless massive construction of high-rise apartments and buildings has replaced one-family homes in the name of “better” housing for urban residents. This urbanscape has reconfigured the formation of cities as homogenized, losing spatial particularities, communities, and lives within the spaces and engendering social inequalities between classes.

The propaganda for such massive developments has also been recently perpetuated by urban planning projects throughout many cities in South Korea including Seoul, with its New Town Project (NTP). In 2002, NTP began to redevelop spaces in

Seoul to create a “balanced development”; however, NTP ended up creating more inequality due to affordability problems. For example, the previous residents who used to live in the designated areas before the project started could not afford the brand new housing and were priced out and/or evicted because of increased real estate prices. In 2012, Mayor Park Won-soon stated that the NTP “has incurred huge sacrifices, with residents being deprived of their rights to reside and rights to live. Today is the day to end the 10 years of New Town in Town history that has made Seoul one huge construction site.”²³⁹ Kim’s site-specific work in the demolition zone of Moraena especially implies how capitalism has eaten up South Korean urban residents’ lives and memories within the space. Kim brings to light what remains in the space where people were swept away from their family homes. In her description of the work, she writes about one particular empty house where it seemed as if the residents had fled in quite a hurry because the place was still littered with personal memorabilia, particularly family photographs. These lingering and flickering memories from these previous dwellers’ belongings, like the photographs, show how vulnerable humans become in the capitalistic system. Here, the poor people were displaced not only from their physical homes but also from their memories of long ago: their entire neighborhood disappeared, as if it never even existed. In Moraena, the neo-liberal and developmentalist mechanisms overlooked the need for a

²³⁹ Seong-Kyu Ha, “The Endogenous Dynamics of Urban Renewal and Gentrification in Seoul,” in *Global Gentrification: Uneven Development and Displacement*, eds. Loretta Lees, Hyun Bang Shin and Ernesto Lopez-Morales (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2015), 172.

social safety net for the poor and poorest that had no choice of housing and spatial belonging.

The *Naked City Spleen* series occupies these disappearing spaces and invisible faces of the cities as opposed to publicly exposed and visible faces of urbanscapes such as well-kept parks and oversized monuments. By taking over these hidden public faces of the cities, Kim's work questions people's spatial belonging, which is often limited to the surface of the ground, bringing the viewers from underground spaces to the top of the city. For example, Kim's work in New York City has taken her to Hell's Kitchen Tunnel (also dubbed the Tunnel of Luv) and the Freedom Tunnel. Kim also opens up spatial possibilities in "a trialectics of spatiality, between history, society, and space."²⁴⁰ Her descriptions of each photo posted on her website about the *Naked City Spleen* series disclose the historical or cultural implications of the places she engaged with, and her motivation and knowledge of the spaces' socio-political significances. For example, her piece about the Freedom Tunnel gives us a brief history of society and space:

In the 1930s, Robert Moses covered the New York Central Railroad line to expand and improve Riverside Park, creating a tunnel underneath. With an increased use of cars and trucks for transportation, the tunnel was soon abandoned and became a haven for the homeless. Hundreds of people moved into the tunnel and built their dwellings, creating underground communities. In 1991, the tunnel was reopened for use by Amtrak, and the

²⁴⁰ Soja, *Thirdspace*, 8-12.

shantytown was bulldozed. It is impossible to know what actually happened to all the evictees.²⁴¹

After the 1987 stock market crash, a recession in the U.S. started in 1990 and unemployment rose to 7.8%.²⁴² Yet real estate prices, which had already run up during the 1980s, rose 84% during the 1990s.²⁴³ Those who lost their jobs could no longer afford to live in New York, and the massive highly successful effort by developers to convert rental apartments to co-ops forced many renters from their homes.²⁴⁴ As homelessness grew, many searched for shelter where they could. What happened to the evictees who once belonged in this space and were pushed out by the emergent value of transportation to make way for another group of people who could afford traveling by train? As a transportation infrastructure, the Freedom Tunnel connects a central hub in the heart of the city to many locations outside of the metropolis, but in order to establish such connectivity, hundreds of homeless people were driven out of their makeshift homes in the tunnel. In her Freedom Tunnel photographs, Kim's idea of deprivation is accentuated by her bodily exposure. In the similar manner that Cindy Sherman performs uncertainty and anxiety in her *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), Kim performs vulnerability and

²⁴¹ Kim, "Populating My Solitude."

²⁴² Rich Karlgaard, "The Not So Great Recession....," *Forbes*, March 11, 2010, <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/2010/0329/opinions-rich-karlgaard-great-recession-digital-rules.html>.

²⁴³ E.B. Solomont, "When Will the Boom Break?" *The Real Deal*, April 1, 2015, https://therealdeal.com/issues_articles/when-will-the-boom-break.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

destitution.²⁴⁵ In her corporeal state of nakedness in relation to the space, the site-specificity in Kim's photographed pieces makes the statement that capitalistic forces expel human bodies from spaces and create phantoms out of memories, forever haunting those spaces. Further, it rematerializes the invisible capitalistic forces that once exerted their power within these spaces. Her idea of dispossession is even more powerful, as if she too were one of the evictees with nothing left, not even her clothes. Thus, Kim's site-specific performance utilizes these selected spaces not only for her artistic exploration but also to expose the hidden and forced-to-be-forgotten historical, social, and spatial engagements and conflicts that are part of the unknown stories of these spaces.

In *Naked City Spleen*, each space by itself encompasses feelings of estrangement. The abandoned Freedom Tunnel and the disused Revere sugar factory have lost their function and thus their identity, and Kim's naked female diasporic body accentuates the idea of otherness of the spaces by adding a feeling of displacement. In this sense, Kim's photographed site-specific work creates the process of remapping a diasporic woman's space by inserting her own signature in urban areas: a naked Korean woman's body. In so doing, Kim rejects the stereotyping of diasporic women of color in a city environment. In *America's Asia*, Collen Lye states that the contemporary perception of Asian Americans as a measure of financial success is a racialized judgment that is traceable to North America's historical and social "identification of the Asiatic as the sign of

²⁴⁵ For more information about Sherman's works, see Cindy Sherman and Arthur C.

Danto, *Cindy Sherman: Untitled Film Stills* (London: Schirmer Art Books, 1998).

globalization.”²⁴⁶ Kim’s naked body in these derelict spaces clashes with this racialized conception and her images elicit a dialectical attempt to reconcile her perceptible vulnerability and destitution with the evident privileged security that allows for her nude performances in public. Going beyond being identified and stereotyped, Kim’s performance disturbs the signified notions of urban spheres as American male industrialized spaces. Placed in masculine capitalistic locations, the otherness of the naked female body of the Korean diaspora is a subversive expression that destabilizes the expected behavior and spatial belonging of a diasporic woman.

Janet Wolff argues that diasporic experience is understood based on gender difference, establishing the dominance of men in experiences such as traveling, displacement and movement.²⁴⁷ Yet, through her performative images, Kim disseminates a diasporic woman’s subversion against the one-dimensionality of the patriarchal and capital-centered system in urban areas, and her art can be considered as a diasporic agency of border-crossing. Kim’s nude body does not engage in the everyday life of Korean diasporic women in urban spaces. Her flexible movement, built upon the privilege of free mobility, actually collides with the fixity of the everyday lives of diasporic people in urban areas, and this collision makes the point of Kim’s performance pieces. By choosing not to show the familiarization of everyday life in urban space, Kim does not pursue a pretentious harmony of spatial relationship in which everyday life

²⁴⁶ Collen Lye, *America’s Asia: Racial From and American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 9.

²⁴⁷ Janet Wolff, “On the Road Again: Metaphors of Travel in Cultural Criticism,” in *Cultural Studies* 7, no 12 (1993): 224-239.

expects diaspora to reveal itself in a mundane way. Instead, Kim's body severs the connection to the sense of place in the daily life of the Korean diaspora by subverting expectations by means of her choice of abandoned, dangerous, (presumably) dirty, and hidden urban spaces, and exposing her own nude body for her creation of a new sense of spatial belonging.

With this startling reversal, Kim does not negate the fact that diasporic people in cities feel and make their own stories. She also does not seek the cause of the racialized feelings of isolation, alienation, and loneliness. With *Naked City Spleen*, Kim complicates the structures of race, class, and gender underlying the alienation of the diasporic urban dweller by amplifying the interconnectedness between the affective complexity of space and its possibilities. Stating that "the city has an anatomy and a psyche as complex as that of any human being," she discloses her feelings of alienation and anxiety in the city.²⁴⁸ Kim felt less isolated after discovering and taking photographs in these abandoned city spaces, which she calls "the subconscious of the city, where collective memories and dreams reside."²⁴⁹ The diasporic emotional experience of isolation and loneliness merges with the liberating dream-like quality of her work, echoing Clifford's thought about diaspora in which "the co-presence of 'here' and 'there' is articulated with an antiteleological (sometimes messianic) temporality. Linear history is broken, the present constantly shadowed by a past that is also a desired, but obstructed, future: a renewed, painful yearning."²⁵⁰ This non-linear merging between body, space,

²⁴⁸ Kim, "Populating My Solitude."

²⁴⁹ Kim, "Naked City Statement."

²⁵⁰ Clifford, "Diaspora," 264.

time, and emotion within Kim's site-specific performances illustrates a somewhere in between utopia and dystopia disclosing oppressive realities of "here" and engenders certain imaginative and creative meanings of "there" over the selected places.

Furthermore, without denying these racialized feelings and estranged sense of place *from* and *in* such urban areas, Kim does not simply represent a racialized structure of feelings but complicates it with the dimension of freedom. The element of freedom is very much felt throughout Kim's works by means of her complete nakedness and the acceptance of diasporic women's sensibility, even melancholia.²⁵¹ By actually embracing the chain of feelings consisting of alienation, isolation, and loneliness, she reaches the affective stage of enjoying a sense of liberation and bodily autonomy. That is, Kim is not trapped in the self-deprecation of negative racialized feelings but utilizes those feelings as her artistic tools to defamiliarize the familiar worlds.

By placing her solitary figure in spaces where a naked Korean female body ostensibly should not be, Kim disrupts the dualistic relation between male and female, space and body, the dead and the alive, physical and psychological, East and West, belonging and alienation. This disruption explicitly targets the capitalistic demarcation and the gender-specified classification of space for women, and especially for Asian/Korean diasporic women in urbanscapes. Kim becomes more creative and more

²⁵¹ The relationship between melancholia and being Asian in the United States is analyzed in works by Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) and David L. Eng and Shinhee Han, "A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, ed. David L. Eng and David Kazanjian (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

assertive without negation or self-obliteration as she vibrates her affective sphere woven with feelings of not only isolation, alienation, and loneliness but also of freedom between her body and space. If the main thought brought out from Kim's site-specific performance is "this Korean woman doesn't belong there," then the questions that we must ask ourselves are: Where does she belong then? And where do we?

Conclusion

Margaret Cho's stand-up comedy performances, Dohee Lee's multimedia performances blended with elements of Korean shamanistic rituals, and Miru Kim's photographed site-specific performances create a new community, work with existing communities, and remind us of forced-to-be-forgotten communities in order to make us think of the "what if" possibilities for a group of people, any group of people, to truly find a home. The three Korean American women artists use their bodies as a medium to imagine, as Dolan writes, "performance as a practice in which the individual balances his or her needs with those of community, one where human interaction is about sharing breath."²⁵² Within the variety of performance genres discussed in this chapter, I concentrate on the performative bodies of the artists who create the critical and creative dialogue of a utopic community challenging the notion of belonging that excludes immigrants, people of color, people of different ethnicities, people of different sexual orientations, and dispossessed people. The three women performance artists use their bodies as a medium to connect with a community that they care about: Cho for the Korean American and LGBT and Queer communities; Lee for immigrant communities

²⁵² Dolan, *Utopia in Performance*, 27.

across contemporary and historical times; and Kim for urban communities that have been cast out by forced relocation and thus forgotten.

While unveiling the three women artists' artistic life trajectory as part of the Korean diaspora, I contend that these artists use their female bodies in subversive and disruptive engagements with sexuality, spirituality, and spatiality, to envision a utopic community. This vision is easier to discern in the works of Cho and Lee due to their direct interaction with audiences, but is just as present in Kim's site-specific photography, though more subtle due to the lone aspect of her performance pieces without live spectatorship. To be noted, Kim, when framed in relation to Cho and Lee, does not claim Koreanness and does not address any Korean diasporic community per se; however, she does function as an antithetic example that complicates the analysis. In comparison, Kim's work differs mostly due to its abstract quality, but this intangibility, in fact, holds an invisible connection. All three artists connect with the diasporic experience through their sense of displacement and marginalization propelling them into performing the Korean diaspora as part of their search for belonging. Though their communities do not overlap—and Kim's community holds an ethereal quality in contrast to Cho and Lee—the artists' performance works tell stories through which we can reflect about different formations of diasporic senses of belonging and the potential of utopic communities within ourselves.

Korean diasporic communities may well be disparate but these three case studies together reveal the power of the female body when used as a force to disrupt the existing state of racialized and gendered belonging and capitalistic societies in which violence against individuals or groups of people is justified only because of their "difference."

Through her radical words and physicality, Cho is outspoken about her fight for racial, gender, and sexual justice. Lee connects her body, mind, and spirit to nature and to the gods (Korean and/or African) to help diasporic people find their place in the “New World,” and Kim, in her silent state of nakedness, places her body in sites that visually disturb the maxim that “silence gives consent.”²⁵³ If silence is consent, then these three women do not, in any way, acquiesce to silence. Their performances of the Korean diaspora are made to inspire their audiences to speak up and speak out so as to be heard, acknowledged, accepted, and felt.

²⁵³ From the Latin: “Qui tacet consentit.”

CHAPTER 3
KOREAN AMERICAN ADOPTEES WITNESSING RACE, GENDER, CLASS,
CITIZENSHIP, AND KINSHIP: THE COMPLICATION OF THE KOREAN
DIASPORA IN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL THEATER

Introduction

In the 1990s a number of artists born in South Korea but adopted as children by American parents became adult subjects and started to break the silence that frequently accompanied the international adoption trade. Through the uncompromising analysis of their own lives, these adoptees succeeded in bringing greater visibility to the various economic, social, and psychological issues at stake in the adoption process. Above all, they uncovered various complexities marking the transnational adoption experience on the personal and collective level. Hence, while in 2002, Karen Shimakawa still highlights the absence of “the predicament of Korean American adoptees [...] within Asian American theatre/studies (let alone mainstream theatre-culture),”²⁵⁴ SooJin Pate in 2014 already confidently points to a new realm in critical adoption studies that focuses on the examination of Korean transnational adoption experience through the lens of adoptee artists’ performances.²⁵⁵ Investigating performance works about Korean American

²⁵⁴ Shimakawa, *National Abjection*, 65.

²⁵⁵ SooJin Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee: U.S. Empire and Genealogies of Korean Adoption* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 158-61.

transnational adoption helps us gain new insights into adoption from the point of view of those most concerned—the adoptees themselves—in order to break the silences, unearth the issues, and widen the field of past, current, and future critical adoption studies.

Building upon these observations, this chapter will engage with Korean American adoptees' autobiographical performances that embody the liminal experience of the artists' birth searches for their biological families in South Korea. Drawing on two contemporary solo performance pieces by Korean American women adoptees, Marissa Lichwick's *Yellow Dress* (2011) and Sun Mee Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman* (2012), and one full-cast theater work, Eric Sharp's *Middle Brother* (2014), I argue that these works not only shatter widespread myths about international adoption (such as that of the joyful and sentimental reunion between adoptees and their biological families), but that they also point up Korean American adoptees' entanglement in various gendered, racial, class, citizenship, and kinship scripts imposed on their sense of belonging by two cultures.²⁵⁶ The process of being adopted from one nation to another, from one culture to another, emerges in these performances as a complex personal and transnational experience, emphasizing the normative expectations and limitations imposed upon the individual by the respective nation state's ideologies of gender and racial formation. These artists' performances bring to light systemic forms of racialization and patriarchal mechanisms of oppressing women and reveal the political and economic structures in

²⁵⁶ I attended a performance of Marissa Lichwick's *Yellow Dress* at the Annoyance Theatre in Chicago in May 2015. I am very much indebted to Sun Mee Chomet and Eric Sharp for their permission to view their videotaped performances of *How to Be a Korean Woman* and *Middle Brother*.

which international adoption is embedded.²⁵⁷ Ultimately, these performances raise important questions about children's and human rights.

Arissa H. Oh observes, “the birth searches that adoptees undertake are not just efforts to find their roots or acquire genetic information, but quests for elemental knowledge of who they are.”²⁵⁸ While this quest also informed Chomet's, Lichwick's, and Sharp's birth searches, their autobiographical performances move beyond the quest motif, examining the hidden systemic mechanisms and ideologies that for them have complicated the liminal process of transnational subject formation, of becoming a Korean adoptee in the United States and of returning as an “Americanized” Korean to South Korea. Their performances are designed to lead audiences to rethink the history of South Korean international adoption by exposing its institutional process, economic components, and socio-cultural implication across borders and nations in terms of race, gender, class, citizenship, and kinship. This chapter discusses race as a social and cultural construction about what it means to be Asian and/or white (whiteness pertaining to one's skin color and its unearned privileges, which exist transnationally). It is worth noting that the two Korean women artists discussed were both adopted by white families, but only

²⁵⁷ I use the terms “transnational” and “international” interchangeably following the manner of the critical adoption scholars mentioned and/or quoted in this chapter. See Kim Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians: Korean American Adoptees, Asian American Experiences, and Racial Exceptionalism* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), xiii and Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 15.

²⁵⁸ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 207.

Sun Mee Chomet mentions her adoptive family's additional ethnic and religious identities in her play, telling her biological mother that her adoptive father is Jewish, her mother is Protestant, that they are divorced, and that her father remarried a Catholic woman, who converted to Judaism. Both performers theatricalize the experiences of being part of a white family in the U.S., but not with any ethnic and/or religious specified background.

Lichwick, Chomet, and Sharp bring forth a form of theatrical testimony which encompasses both a source of resistance and a call for social action. In their selected theater pieces, the artists' bodies function as a spectacle disclosing the liminal process of inscribing and re-inscribing belonging in terms of race, gender, class, citizenship, and kinship, throughout their transnational adoption trajectory from South Korea to the United States and their birth search and reunion experience back to Korea. Lichwick, Chomet, and Sharp theatricalize the autobiographical stories of their adoption narratives and return to Korea, spectacularizing critical identity structures as they place their own voices at the center of the stage. At the heart of their works, the artists' own bodies formulate critical spectacles about transnational adoption, actualizing the process of disciplining to be (re)Koreanized or de-Koreanized/Americanized that they have been through as adoptees. This represented process demonstrates how each artist has been interpellated as an adoptee, how the interpellation marks their body, and how their marked body becomes a testimonial spectacle uncovering their compulsory membership and belonging in the Korean diaspora.

The South Korea-United States Trajectory of International Adoption

Adoption is a long-standing practice, but international adoption, the mobilization of children from largely non-Western nations to adoptive parents in the West, is a post-World War II and, particularly, a post-Korean War phenomenon. After the Korean War, South Korea became well known as a country that sent massive numbers of children to foreign countries for adoption. Since 1953 South Korean adoptees have been among the Asian-born children most adopted by other nations, mainly raised by white adoptive parents in the United States and in European countries, such as France and Sweden. On the surface, South Korea's participation in international adoption simply seems to revolve around the goal of finding homes for its "unwanted" children. Rather than celebrating adoption as an admirable mission of saving children from their poor environments, however, it is important to consider why so many South Korean children were not able to find a home in their own country and why most of them have been raised overseas, forming a forced and forgotten Korean diaspora.

Between 1953 and 2008, the total number of South Korean children adopted overseas reached 162,665. During that same period, the United States ranked first among receiving countries, taking in 109,242 Korean children.²⁵⁹ What is significant about the

²⁵⁹ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 21. Other rankings of Korean adoptees by nationality include: France 11,165 from 1968 to 2008; Sweden 9,051 from 1957 to 2005; Denmark 9,297 from 1965 to 2008; and Norway 6,295 from 1955 to 2008. Eleana J. Kim utilizes sources from Tobias Hübinette, "Korean Adoption History," in *Guide to Korea for Overseas Adopted Koreans*, ed. Eleana Kim (Seoul: Overseas Koreans Foundation, 2004) as well as from Hübinette's dissertation, "Comforting an Orphaned Nation:

South Korea-United States adoption phenomenon is that this seemingly altruistic practice became an industry, economically buoyed and ethically justified by the post-Korean War relationship of the two countries, allied in their staunch anti-communist stance and pro-capitalist free market philosophy. This emerging adoption industry was fueled by several significant factors. On the South Korean side, the prevalent ideology of “racial purity” othered and marginalized children born of Korean women and American GIs, effectively turning them into supply for the American adoption market.²⁶⁰ At the same time, on the U.S. side, Christian American narratives of salvation expanded the demand for foreign adoptees.²⁶¹ Foremost here was the Holt Adoption Program, founded by Harry and Bertha Holt, an evangelical couple from rural Oregon. The Holt Program understood it as its mission to “save” Korean orphans by “Christianizing” them.²⁶²

Representations of International Adoption and Adopted Koreans in Korean Popular Culture,” Doctoral Dissertation, Stockholm University, 2005. She also draws on a document published by the Korean Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs (MIHWAF), *The Current State of Domestic and International Adoption* (국내외 입양 현황, *kungnaeoe ibyang hyônhwang*) (Seoul: Ministry for Health, Welfare and Family Affairs, 2009).

²⁶⁰ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 48-75.

²⁶¹ Oh defines Christian Americanism as a “fusion of vaguely Christian principles with values identified as exceptionally ‘American’: an expansive sense of responsibility and a strong belief in the importance of family.” See Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 79.

²⁶² Oh cites Harry Holt as stating that with his program he wished to fulfill “a threefold purpose: to save lives, to get these children into homes, and to get them into Christian

During and after the Korean War, the immediate institutionalization of military relief aid included financial support, technical assistance, and the establishment of foster care and adoption practices, engendering South Korea's dependency on external sources of welfare from Western countries and preventing it from establishing an internal social welfare system of its own.²⁶³ In 1962 the South Korean government started family planning and population control programs to lower the fertility rate, usurping women's reproductive rights by exerting its power over women's bodies. As part of this control, it enforced the practice of sex-biased abortion.²⁶⁴ The only alternative for poor, working women, who could not afford child care or were not able to live with the unbearable social stigma of being a single mother or having a child out of wedlock, was to relinquish their infants for adoption.²⁶⁵ It is because of this intolerant South Korean patriarchal environment that "through the 1960s and 1970s, international adoption became almost

homes." See Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 96. See also the Holt International website, which describes itself as "a Christian organization committed to expressing God's compassion for children." "Our Service to Children," *Holt International*, accessed June 30, 2017, <http://www.holtinternational.org/>.

²⁶³ Hübinette, "Comforting an Orphaned Nation," 54.

²⁶⁴ In consequence of this project, as Hübinette points out, "the average number of children per woman [...] decreased from 6.3 in 1960 to 1.6 in 1990." *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶⁵ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 25. Drawing on data from the Korean Ministry of Health, Welfare and Family Affairs (MIHWAF), Kim identifies the circumstances that from 1958 to 2008 caused Korean adoptions overseas as single mothers (102,433), broken homes (28,956), and abandoned children (29,975).

synonymous with adoption from Korea.”²⁶⁶ During the 1970s, international adoption from South Korea was significantly less expensive and the process less bureaucratic and faster than from other countries, placing South Korea at the top of the list in the exportation of children. This trend increased under the dictator Chun Doo-hwan’s government deregulations in the 1980s, which eliminated the quota system for adoption agencies and enabled greater economic competition among them. The 1980s thus witnessed the peak in international adoptions from South Korea with a total number of 66,511 adoption cases.²⁶⁷

Under the flag of U.S. multiculturalism, this international adoption from Asia—specifically from South Korea—to the United States was further reinforced and validated by protests from Native American and African American communities against domestic adoption of Native American and African American children by white parents in the 1970s and 80s.²⁶⁸ This resulted in an increase in adoptions of Asian children—particularly when Asian Americans came to be regarded as the “model minority.” While this stereotype increased the desirability of Asian children, it also harmed the adoptees due to the high expectations of adoptive families. Oh explains that “Korean adoptees were part of this reformulation of Asianness [to ‘model’ citizens]—as malleable children who could be raised to be good Americans, they not only refuted arguments about unassimilable Asians but also were recast as the most desirable of immigrants.”²⁶⁹ In

²⁶⁶ Hübinette, “Comforting an Orphaned Nation,” 69.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁶⁸ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 92-120.

²⁶⁹ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 12.

1975 the *Seattle Times* published an article entitled “Adopted Korean Fully Americanized.” This headline not only praised how easily Korean children could be assimilated into American culture, but it also commended the adoptive family for their effective erasure of the child’s Asian origins.²⁷⁰ Kim Park Nelson points out that this white-privileged narrative in the mass media highlights the American story of international adoption as “a win-win situation for Asian adoptees and their White American parents.”²⁷¹ Furthermore, the Korean adoptee’s body has been used to support the notion of colorblindness, which reflects only the mostly white adoptive parents’ point of view of their parenting and adoption experience as a celebratory multicultural “American” practice. Oh Myo Kim, Reed Reichwald, and Richard Lee’s research reveals that adoptive parents have a tendency to not only overvalue their adopted children’s cultural socialization to birth culture, but also to gear them toward social activities related to their birth cultures all the while overlooking a deep conversation about what their children’s actual experiences are: racial discrimination in the U.S.²⁷²

According to Pate, media representation of adoptees as being war orphans underlies the Cold War-related message of the U.S. being a paternal humanitarian Uncle

²⁷⁰ “Adopted Koreans Fully ‘Americanized,’” *Seattle Times*, August 10, 1975. As cited in Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 4.

²⁷¹ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 4-5.

²⁷² Oh Myo Kim, Reed Reichwald, and Richard Lee, “Cultural Socialization in Families with Adopted Adolescents: A Mixed Method, Multi-Informant Study,” *Journal of Adolescent Research* 28, no. 1 (2013): 69-95.

Sam, disseminating an American salvation of South Korea.²⁷³ This media image of adoptees as war orphans was no more than an *image*, as war orphans who were adopted by Americans during the post-Korean War period only made up four percent of all Korean adoptions before 1962.²⁷⁴ The perpetuation of fixed images of Korean adoptees in U.S. media reflects that transnational adoption as a whole has been instrumentalized to serve American ideologies of colorblind multiculturalism and worldwide humanitarianism—even though their salvation activity of rescuing Korean War orphans very much concealed the reality of America’s responsibility for Korea’s separation, U.S. massacres of Korean civilians, American GI-South Korean government controlled prostitution, and the proxy adoption industry during and/or after the Korean War.

In 1988 the Seoul Olympic Games put South Korea into the worldwide spotlight. Although the many international media outlets highlighted South Korea’s remarkable economic success, some of them also publicized South Korea’s practice of international adoption and provoked an uproar when they criticized the government for its child-exporting trade.²⁷⁵ Concerned with the deterioration of their national image, the South

²⁷³ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*.

²⁷⁴ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 41. Park Nelson uses demographics from Hübinette’s dissertation, “Comforting an Orphaned Nation,” and from Richard H. Weil, “International Adoption: The Quiet Migration,” *International Migration Review* 18, no.2 (1984): 276-293.

²⁷⁵ Tobias Hübinette lists newspapers that disparaged South Korea’s intense participation in international adoption: *New York Times* (April 21, 1988), *International Herald Tribune* (April 22, 1988), and *Washington Post* (December 12, 1988)—all discussing South

Korean government, in the following decade, attempted to regulate the annual number of international adoptions by downsizing adoption agencies and encouraged domestic adoption by offering tax reductions. In 2013 the government even signed the Hague Adoption Convention, which states that children should be first considered for adoption by families in their birth country.²⁷⁶ Although the number of children put up for international adoption has by now decreased in comparison to the 1980s, South Korea today still offers its citizens the “option” to relinquish their children instead of dismantling the patriarchal structures that continue to oppress women and instead of constructing a solid social welfare system.²⁷⁷

Korea’s adoption practice as a trade in human capital. See Hübinette, “Comforting an Orphaned Nation,” 86. North Korea also condemned South Korea’s involvement with international adoption practices. See Hübinette, “North Korea and Adoption,” *Korean Quarterly* 4 no. 5 (2002): 24-25.

²⁷⁶ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 206. See also “Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption,” Article 33, *The Hague Conference on Private International Law (HCCH)*, accessed June 25, 2017, <https://www.hcch.net/en/instruments/conventions/full-text/?cid=69>.

²⁷⁷ In 2018 South Korea will host the PyeongChang Winter Olympic Games. In 2016 the nation spent only 10.4 percent of its GDP on social welfare, ranking 34th among the 35 OECD member countries (above Mexico with 7.5 percent). See Kim Da-sol, “Korea ranks bottom in OECD for welfare spending,” *Korea Herald*, October 31, 2016, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20161031000659>.

Starting in the 1990s, post-Korean War international adoption also came to be challenged by a number of scholars, artists, and advocates, who, very often, were themselves adoptees. According to many of them, the public rendering of adoptees as pitiful and tragic war orphans, as economic byproducts of the political relations between South Korea and the United States of America, reduced their subjectivity, turning them into tools for the promotion of white-centered multiculturalism in the United States and for the justification of patriarchal and nationalistic developmentalism in South Korea. These adoptees set out to question and contest lopsided representations of Korean adoptees and of South Korea's international adoption practices by speaking of their own pre- and post-adoption experiences, of their birth searches and reunions with biological families, and by examining Korean adoptees' identity constructions. Among the contemporary Korean adoptees who have explored their adoption stories (and the social and political implications of international adoption history) are a number of artists, such as filmmaker Deann Borshay Liem, hip-hop musician/actor DAN aka DAN, writer Jane Jeong Trenka, visual artist Jane Jin Kaisen, and theater artists Eric Sharp, Katie Hae Leo, Marissa Lichwick, and Sun Mee Chomet. This chapter focuses on Lichwick, Chomet, and Sharp as their performance works vividly render the liminal experience of adoption to audiences, particularly to audiences of other adoptees, creating a community of witnesses that provides a powerful counterpoint both to the myth of an inclusive U.S. multiculturalism as well as to the family reunion myth of international adoption stories.

Three Adoptees, Three Different Stories of Birth Search and Reunion

As Park Nelson points out, “transnational adoption [...] is a complicated exchange, where children, the governments of the two nations, both sets of parents (birth and adoptive), (usually) two adoption agencies, adoption workers, social workers, childcare providers, attorneys, and a host of other intermediaries may be involved.”²⁷⁸

The complexity of the adoption process is clearly seen in Chicago-based actress and playwright Marissa Lichwick’s solo performance piece, *Yellow Dress*. In this piece, written and performed by her, Lichwick performs over twenty different characters, with whose help she recounts her own transnational experience of adoption.²⁷⁹ In the play, Riss (the character representing Lichwick) returns as an adult to South Korea in an attempt to find her biological family. During flashback scenes, Lichwick depicts her childhood to show the process of how she and her biological brother, Nicholas, were adopted from a Korean orphanage to a family in the United States when she was five. Her portrayal of her childhood in America is sometimes funny and sometimes shocking,

²⁷⁸ Kim Park Nelson, “Shopping for Children in the International Marketplace,” in *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption*, eds. Jane Jeong Trenka, Julia Chinyere Oparah, and Sun Yung Shin (Cambridge: South End Press, 2006), 89.

²⁷⁹ *Yellow Dress* previewed at the University of Washington School of Drama and the Guthrie Experience at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. In June 2011 it made its West Coast debut at the Hollywood Fringe Festival and its East Coast debut at the New York International Fringe Festival. It was also performed at the 2015 Korean American Adoptee Adoptive Family Network Conference in St. Louis and produced by Silk Road Rising in Chicago in October 2015.

problematizing what it means to be a person of color in a white family. Her scenes in present-day South Korea likewise address her position as an outsider. While Riss succeeds in reuniting with her biological family, she fails to experience the powerful emotional bond that she had expected to fill the void in her life. A little yellow dress, which she had loved as an orphanage child and which had been taken away from her, is one of the few substantial happy memories that have stayed with her throughout her life. Thanks to her Korean uncle, who had retrieved the dress from the orphanage and kept it all those years, Riss is able to find some type of closure to her past as she returns to the U.S. clutching her yellow dress.

Sun Mee Chomet is a St. Paul-based actress, dancer, playwright, and director, whose plays, *Asiamnesia* (2008) and *The Sex Show* (2016), deal with the intersecting experiences of living as an Asian American woman in the United States as well as in Asia.²⁸⁰ Similar to Lichwick's performance, Chomet's semi-autobiographical story, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, performed by herself, focuses on the process of searching for and reuniting with her biological family.²⁸¹ She finds her biological mother through a

²⁸⁰ *The Sex Show* was one of twenty-seven Knight Foundation Arts Challenge Grant awardees in 2016 and, at the time of this writing, is a work-in-progress with the Mu Performing Arts' 2017-18 Season.

²⁸¹ *How to Be a Korean Woman* premiered in 2012 at Dreamland Arts, as a part of a collaborative work named "The Origin(s) Project: Memoirs in Motion" with Korean adoptee artist Katie Hae Leo's *N/A*, in St. Paul and was staged in 2013 at the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis as well as at the 2013 IKAA Gathering in Seoul. It was also performed at the Asian Art Initiative in Philadelphia as a part of an artist exchange

South Korean television program that attempts to reunite people with their lost loved ones.²⁸² Unlike Lichwick, Chomet chose to create only female characters for her solo performance in order to reveal a powerful female element in her quest: “it’s very much about this longing for mother. [...] For the most part all of the people who helped me to find her were women [...] There was this theme of female connection.”²⁸³ Through her connection with other women, Chomet comes to realize that her position as a woman

program in 2012 and at the Rochester Civic Theatre in Minnesota in 2013. Chomet performed this piece at the Seventh Annual Philadelphia Theatre Research Symposium at Villanova University in 2013. Chomet has been recognized by the following distinctions: a McKnight Theater Artist Fellowship (2013); TCG Fox Fellowship (2013-15); a Lucille Lortel nomination (2015); the Star Tribune’s “Best of” lists for *Asiamnesia* (2007) and *The Origin(s) Project* (2012); one of City Pages’ Artists of the Year (2008); and the Lavender Magazine’s “Best Solo Performance” honors for her play, *How to Be a Korean Woman* (2012).

²⁸² The nationally syndicated Korean television show “I Miss that Person,” produced by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) since 1996, became well known for Korean adult adoptees from all over the world trying to find their biological families. See “I Miss That Person,” *KBS GLOBAL*, accessed June 18, 2017,

http://nenglish.kbs.co.kr/tv/program_view.html?sec=1&No=135, and Hosu Kim,

“Television Mothers: Birth Mothers Lost and Found in the Search-and-Reunion Narrative,” in *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption Practice in South Korea: Virtual Mothering* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115-143.

²⁸³ Sun Mee Chomet, interview by author, St. Paul, May 18, 2015.

within South Korea's intricate structure of gender dynamics and patriarchal power is very different from that of herself as a woman in America, rooted in a liberal and feminist upbringing. Chomet's story boldly highlights the reality of returning Korean American women adoptees, who "encounter Korean forms of androcentrism and sexism that they experience as even more toxic than those they suffered in the U.S."²⁸⁴

Eric Sharp is a Minneapolis-based actor and playwright. As an actor, he has not only been actively involved in and working for Mu Performing Arts, but he has also performed with numerous other theatrical companies.²⁸⁵ Sharp debuted as a playwright at Mu, where in 2014 he premiered his first full-length, full-cast play, *Middle Brother*. Developed through Mu and the Jerome Foundation New Performance Program, *Middle Brother* follows the narrative of Billy, a Korean adoptee in Waterloo, Iowa, since the age of seven, who, in his late twenties, decides to move to Seoul to live. Once in Korea, he discovers he has a biological brother, Young-Nam (Hyung in the play). Billy's story

²⁸⁴ Margaret Homans, "Adoption and Return: Transnational Genealogies, Maternal Legacies," in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, eds. Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 189.

²⁸⁵ Eric Sharp played the character of Engineer Will in *Start Down* written by Eleanor Burgess in the world premiere at the Alliance Theater in Atlanta in 2016. He also played multiple roles as the Ghost of Christmas Future, David, Belle's husband, Mr. Wimple in *A Christmas Carol* at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis that same year. In 2017, he performed in Lloyd Suh's play *Charles Francis Chan Jr's Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery* at Mu.

incorporates that of his two brothers: in Korea, Young-Nam, who spent eleven years in an orphanage, and in Iowa, Gabe—though not biologically related—Billy’s adoptive younger brother, whose own biological parents are unknown to him. The title of the play refers to Billy, who thus becomes a middle brother as the consequence of his return journey. *Middle Brother* is a dramatic amalgamation of Sharp’s semi-autobiographical experiences in the course of reuniting with his own biological family. Sharp renders his story in a highly imaginative way set in the present 2010s time of the play with flashbacks to when Billy was a young boy in Korea and an adoptee in the U.S. in the 1980s but mixed with a fantasy Joseon Dynasty period.²⁸⁶ These two time periods switch back and forth to illustrate when Billy was lost; an imagination of the Joseon Dynasty with a similar plot involving royal family brothers; and the time period when the playwright himself went from becoming an orphan to an adoptee.

The three autobiographical performances reveal what it means to be a “Korean/Asian” adoptee in an interracial family in the U.S. as well as what it means to be an “American” returning to South Korea. As Park Nelson comments, “the experiences of discrimination that these adoptees face are transnational—for being Asian in appearance in the United States and for not being culturally Korean enough in Korea.”²⁸⁷ In foregrounding how their transnational liminal experience of adoption and birth searches

²⁸⁶ In the production Sharp purposely mixes the early 1980s and the Joseon Dynasty times to accentuate the fantasy-like element of the flashbacks. The dramatic illustration of the Joseon period is a fantasy and does not intend the historical accuracy of the Joseon Dynasty.

²⁸⁷ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 185.

prominently intersects with issues of race, gender, and class, the three artists also disclose, deconstruct, and resist the gender, racial, and class scripts inscribed onto their bodies by two cultures, two nations, and two families.

Deconstructing Racial Scripts in Marissa Lichwick's *Yellow Dress*

By embodying multi-characterizations crossing racial and ethnic boundaries, Lichwick depicts the rigidity of ethnocentric demarcation that she, as an adoptee in her real life, experienced during her return journey to Korea. When Lichwick's character (Riss) arrives at the airport in Korea, her first exchange is with an older Korean man who, upon hearing her speaking broken Korean, switches to English and asks:

KOREAN MAN. Are you Korean?

RISS. Oh yes, I'm Korean American.

KOREAN MAN. Ah I see, you're American Korean.

RISS. No I'm Korean American. I was Korean First [sic] and then I became an American.

KOREAN MAN. You look American.²⁸⁸

Performing this confusion shows that the boundaries between nationality, ethnicity, and race are unstable, and that this instability becomes maximized when an adoptee returns to Korea and is faced with people who look ethnically identical but use a different language. The Korean man also muddles up Riss' race due to her physiological or behavioral appearance by saying "You look American." This man misconstrues and defines "American-looking" Koreans as Americans first and thus almost white or, at least, not "authentically" Korean. Lichwick's embodiments of the man as a Korean in and from

²⁸⁸ Marissa Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, unpublished, 2012, 8.

Korea, and Riss as a Korean adoptee calling herself Korean American but being labeled American, destabilize this confusing identification of the adoptee. In another scene, Riss's encounter with a female Korean adoptee expresses a different exposure to racial scripts imposed on Korean adoptees.

RISS. Are you Korean?

MINDY. Yea gurl Korean Adopted, just got back from Korea.

“Consahaminda”. Thank you.

RISS. What were you doing in Korea?

MINDY. Reuniting with my birth family bitch, why else would I be there?

My life's awesome, I'm rich, my family's rich, my boyfriend's rich, he went to MIT and totally owns a plane. I mean come on.

RISS. How did you find them? Your birth parents?

MINDY. It's super easy girl, you call a post adoption agency, you give them your family name, you then wait; they then totally call you and tell you they found them. You then fly to Korea and totally meet them. But, it's so super sad. Everyone like totally cries and wants to touch you and tell you that you're “healthy”. Oh shoot me. Anyway, my rich, hot, white boyfriend is totally waiting for me because I'm (grabbing her boobs) “healthy.”²⁸⁹

Mindy's behavior, attitude, and way of speaking in Lichwick's characterization reveal her total embrace of privilege-evasive scripts as if she “passed” for a white person.

Accentuating the American (essentialized as white) young female character, Lichwick

²⁸⁹ Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, 12.

shows Mindy having the curiosity and/or need to reunite with her birth family, yet she experienced this reunion from a white-privilege point of view as if removed from it all and even annoyed by it: “Oh shoot me.” The contrast between these two female characters reveals a differing racial formation, as if Mindy completely disavowed her race and became white or—as Riss later describes this type of transformation regarding her little Asian adopted sister—she became “a twinkie--yellow on the outside, white on the inside.”²⁹⁰ By creating a character like Mindy and performing this character, Lichwick echoes Alison Bailey in that “racial scripts are internalized at an early age, [and] privilege is granted on the basis of whitely performances.”²⁹¹ With her rich family and her “rich, hot, white boyfriend,” Mindy is performing a “whitely” script, believing that since she is in a relationship with a white male, she can automatically live the privileged life of a white woman. This performative warning by Lichwick, as an adoptee performer, questions the perpetuation of the whitely script on adoptees/Asians and shows us the danger if used as a tool to justify a colorblind ideology in the U.S. and efface racial discrimination from which Korean adoptees have suffered. According to Peggy McIntosh, white privilege is the unawareness of the racial privilege that white people have due to their unearned skin privileges making those specificities visible.²⁹² This

²⁹⁰ Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, 43.

²⁹¹ Alison Bailey, “Locating Traitorous Identities: Toward a View of Privilege-Cognizant White Character,” *Hypatia* 13, no. 3 (1998): 27-42. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3810697>.

²⁹² Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women’s Studies,” *Working Paper 189*, Wellesley Centers for Women, Wellesley, MA, 1988.

structure of whiteness in the United States penetrated into adoptees' liminal experience and constructed their social location in between Americanness and Asianness, a location that Mindy subconsciously denies. Her glorification of whiteness is a gesture of reifying a white hegemony and justifies white privilege.

Lichwick's autobiographical story of being adopted as a child takes the audience on a journey to her past, rendering public a number of sensitive issues that have been invisible behind the façade of the "grateful" adoptee master-narrative, such as child trafficking and sexual abuse as well as the disciplinary function of orphanages. In one scene, transforming her body into her relinquished child-self brought into the San Rok Orphanage, Lichwick offers audiences the harsh reality of orphanage life, where abuses like child molestation were not unusual, such as when a male employee played "touch time" with her. In another scene, she renders Riss's eager attempts to improve her English and portrays her admiring the image of a white woman with blonde hair and blue eyes on a torn-out page from an American magazine. As Pate points out, an orphanage essentially functioned as "a processing station," where an unwanted orphan was transformed into a desirable adoptee for American clients.²⁹³ This entailed learning English, converting to Christianity, and practicing the performance of doll-like girlhood.

Once in the U.S. this "desirable" child, however, encounters at various moments the latent racial bias of its adoptive family. Pate comments that "Orientalist fantasies, global capitalism, and the rise of a consumer commodity culture coalesced with the racially integrative politics of Cold War Orientalism to create a discourse of yellow desire that motivated Americans to imagine and welcome Korean children as a part of

²⁹³ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 101-125.

their national and private family.”²⁹⁴ Here, yellow desire is a concept that is particularly associated with Korean adoptees in which “the bodies of Korean children become desirable because of their potential to integrate successfully in American society and in their new American family.”²⁹⁵ Lichwick shows us the unstable demarcation between contrasting ideologies, exposing how “yellow desire”—covertly inscribed on an Asian adoptee—can easily actualize into a form of “yellow peril.” In contrast to “yellow desire,” the “yellow peril” is a historically constructed Western xenophobia of Asianness, which reflects a racial bias embodying a fear of an Asian “invasion” of the Western World, thus marking Asian bodies as inassimilable subjects. In a scene in her new American home, Riss plays doctor with her adoptive American little brother. As Lichwick renders how the children innocently kiss and tussle on the floor, she suddenly transforms herself into her adoptive mother bursting into the room and screaming, “Oh no oh no. Oh no. I knew something would be wrong with you oriental kids [...] there will be no incest in my house!”²⁹⁶ The lines are delivered in a slowly articulated voice-over, thus satirizing the adoptive mother’s horror of incest. With her critical mimicry, Lichwick points up how even supposedly liberal, white adoptive parents, like her mother, subconsciously continue to racialize their adoptive children by subscribing to entrenched fantasies of sexual otherness. This scene poignantly theatricalizes how desire and anxiety

²⁹⁴ Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 17.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

²⁹⁶ Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, 38.

are intrinsically related in stereotypical perceptions of otherness, as Homi Bhabha has compellingly shown.²⁹⁷

If Lichwick's life as a Korean adoptee in America is shown as being marked by racial scripts, her adult experience of returning to South Korea reflects her difficulties with the forced silence that South Korean societal norms dictate on the issue of adoption. When Riss as an adult visits the orphanage, the owner asks her why she wants to find her biological family; she answers: "I have to discover what's been missing my whole life."²⁹⁸ Yet, when finally meeting her family, Riss is confronted with their persistent silence on the issue of her adoption: "I found almost all of them, yet they didn't want to open up the past to me. Everything was an illusion. Just like my American-ness in Korea and my Korean-ness in America. So I decide to head back to the United States."²⁹⁹ Riss realizes that to them she has become a foreigner in her own country of birth. Upon leaving Seoul, she tells us, "as I was riding away, I looked at the Yellow Dress and realized that Korea was not going to define me and America didn't define me; it wasn't about definition, it was about forgiveness."³⁰⁰

As Riss is packing to go back to the United States, a flood of memories comes back to her in a brief sound collage of utterances from various persons she had encountered on her life's journey as an adoptee:

"My memory escape me."

²⁹⁷ Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 66.

²⁹⁸ Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, 15.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 47.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

“I chose God.”

“Rachel, I found your shoe.”

“Welcome to McDonald’s, how can I helps you?”

“A, B, She, D ...!!”

“Such big eyes!”

“Beat it” by Michael Jackson

“Your name is Marissa.”

“You are enough.”

“Oma [mother]! I gotta go!!”

“It’s not about your nose ... you are enough.”³⁰¹

As she repeats these quotes from herself and other persons (such as her biological mother and brother, her adoptive mother and sister), Lichwick attempts to evoke these characters through bodily movements, and her demeanor and posture change quickly from one line to the next. For example, on her line “such big eyes,” she transforms herself into the five-year old Riss looking at the magazine image of the blond American woman trying to make her eyes look bigger; she then suddenly becomes her teenage self, dancing to “Beat it” in her American home. Next, she changes into her adoptive mother telling Riss in a soothing voice that she has a new name, “Marissa.” This sequence of utterances and body movements not only recapitulates what has happened in the performance, but also compresses Riss’s lifetime of being shaped consciously and subconsciously as an adoptee. While the collage style suggests a rather fragmented and incomplete sense of

³⁰¹ Lichwick, *Yellow Dress*, 48.

self, this condensed moment of memories, nonetheless, accomplishes a significant breakthrough for Riss, who accepts her various entangled selves.

Resisting Gender Scripts in Sun Mee Chomet's *How to Be a Korean Woman*

In contrast to Lichwick, Chomet formulates a female-only connection among her personifications. Her performance serves as a cautionary tale for Korean American women adoptees who meet up with their biological families and, in the process, come face to face with South Korea's construction of femininity and its politics of patriarchy. Sun Mee Chomet's piece, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, unveils the patriarchal oppression that female adoptees are subjected to when they return to South Korea. Chomet (who in the play uses both her actual name and her American given name, Rachel) tells us that she was relinquished for adoption at the age of six months and that her American adoptive mother was "a tomboy, an ultra feminist."³⁰²

MOM. Rachel, (*heavy sigh*) how many times do we have to go through this?!! I never bought you Barbies or dolls because they're oppressive representations of women! (*crossing around stage, picking up all remaining costume pieces as if cleaning*) I didn't let you try out for cheer-leading because whooping it up for boys is degrading! (*picking up lipstick and compact*) And you don't need make-up, because you are beautiful inside and that's all that matters. The same goes for SHOPPING! (*puts all props behind USR curtain and quickly crosses*

³⁰² Sun Mee Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, unpublished, 2012, 23.

DSC, as if handing SUN MEE a football helmet) Now put on this football helmet and go play with your brothers!³⁰³

Growing up from such a young age with a North American feminist mother may have empowered Chomet as a woman in the U.S., but it certainly didn't prepare her for the "re-feminization" to which she would be subjected when she reunited with her biological family in South Korea. In fact, as Sun Mee herself comments directly to the audience at the beginning of the performance, she was not prepared for many issues she was going to face about adoption practices while trying to find her biological mother:

SUN MEE. That's when I began to realize...almost every Korean was affected by adoption. Whether it was a relative or a friend, there were so many secrets. (*noticing people on subway*) No one wanted to talk about it in public, but in private, it haunted the memories of all Koreans.³⁰⁴

When Sun Mee finally finds her biological mother, the adoption agency caseworker tells her that they can only meet in secret. This is because her biological mother is married, and her husband does not know about Sun Mee; if found out, her mother would "lose everything including contact with her two sons."³⁰⁵ Later, on the last night together with her mother, her grandmother, and her two aunts, Sun Mee asks her mother when she might be able to sleep over at her house and meet her two sons. Her mother answers: maybe in twenty years, after her husband dies. The scenes illustrate the fear and secrecy

³⁰³ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 23.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

in which all of these women, including Sun Mee, are forced to live. Through these two scenes, Chomet exposes how silence is used as a form of patriarchal oppression in South Korea to restrict, confine, and control women.

Where Lichwick presents us with controlled emotions, underlining her sense of alienation from her biological mother, Chomet undercuts the expected sentimentality with humor and irony. As her grandmother hugs Sun Mee, kissing and crying, she speaks to her in Korean. Sun Mee believes her to be saying, “Look at your beautiful skin and healthy body. Your family in America raised you well. I’m glad you’re okay. You look just like your mother. I want to never let you go!”³⁰⁶ Even though Sun Mee does not understand Korean, she is happy and moved by this wonderful gush of emotions. Later she asks one of her aunts who speaks English what her grandmother actually said:

HALMONI: You look TERRIBLE! She said you look like you were adopted by FARMERS because of your clothes. She said you need to wear more MAKE-UP and she asked why you’re so TAN and why your hair looks SO BAD. She said she remembered when you were a baby, you had fair skin and you were PRETTY with BIG EYES and she wants to know WHAT HAPPENED? She said you look HORRIBLE! She wants us to take you SHOPPING!³⁰⁷

This witty scene demonstrates that the repetitions of the romanticized and melodramatic expectation of the given knowledge about transnational adoption tend to overly simplify

³⁰⁶ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 19.

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

the diverse situations and reality that adoptees who reunite with their biological family actually confront.

Chomet's performance also shows us the importance of physicality as her body connects to memories so deeply rooted but that can be instantly engendered. Audience members are presented with a scene in which her Korean grandmother hugs her and holds her in a tight clutch and she says: "my grandmother pours her body into mine, holding onto my arm, refusing to let go... somehow my muscle memory remembers this feeling and has been crawling back towards it all of my life."³⁰⁸ She then recreates this hug and we can see how this muscle memory is actualized in her performance with a controlled bodily movement and without a word. In this single silent movement, the entire transnational separation/reunion experience is immediately conjured up and dramatically differs from the superficial spectacularization of adoptees' reunions as sentimentalized narratives in Korean TV and film.³⁰⁹ The focus of Chomet's action is on the intensity of

³⁰⁸ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 20.

³⁰⁹ One of the recent cinematic representations of spectacularizing adoptees' birth searches and reunions can be seen in *Ode to My Father* (국제시장, 2014). This fiction film, which spans Korean history from the 1950s until contemporary time, has been recorded as the second largest box office hit in South Korean film history. An estimated 15 million South Korean people, about one third of the Korean population, watched this film in movie theaters. This sentimental post-war scenario film, however, was one of several that were not only produced by the biggest movie producer, CJ Entertainment, but also openly promoted by South Korean President Park Geun Hye's administration favoring a nationalistic movie industry (this former administration also blatantly created a blacklist

her body, not on the viewer's feeling about it. In other words, she creates the opposite of the sympathy that Korean TV programs and cinematic representations generate to affect Korean viewers watching Korean adoptees' reunions with their biological families.

Chomet's body and movements create not only the visualization of her story but also the inside-out of her emotion and memory.

In another scene, Sun Mee is whisked by her biological family into a whirlwind of shopping, hairdressing, exfoliating, and Korean baths, partly to make up for lost bonding time but partly also due to her mother's and aunts' belief that Sun Mee is still unmarried

of left and liberal artists). The film tells the story of a man who was separated from his younger sister during the frantic December 1950 evacuation of Heungnam Port during the Korean War. Years later he seeks her out through this TV program and discovers that she had been adopted by an American family. Their first meeting to attempt verification that the adoptee woman is in fact related to him is done via satellite. The brother is in a TV studio in Seoul and the adoptee sister is in Los Angeles. This satellite meeting scene, cutting back and forth between them and shots of their old birth mother and other family members watching the live show at the same time, is one of the most emotionally charged parts of the film. The scene following this highly tear-filled one shows the incredibly joyful family and relatives. Toward the end of the film there is a happy reunion scene with the adopted sister's newly married family in Korean traditional outfits bowing in Korean traditional way. The insertion of the Korean female adoptee's story reinstates the notion of adoptees as the nation's objects of sympathy within a happy reunion sending the message that even though Korea experienced such hardships, now as a "developed" country, it has the capability to embrace even its lost children.

because she failed to make herself “attractive” to her dates. Through her biological family, Sun Mee soon discovers the requirements of how to be a Korean woman, which she shares by directly addressing the audience:

You must get married [...] have children [...] go to church [...] cook [...] take care of others more than yourself [...] not be too skinny [...] not be too fat [...] dress well [...] have an expensive purse and wallet [...] wear scarves when it is 80 degrees [...] strive for perfect skin [...] wear a visor [...] color your hair [...] have straight thick eyebrows, not thin like Americans [...] use a lipstick brush [...] have amazing nail colors that are super cute [...] you must wear fashionable shoes, even if they hurt a lot.³¹⁰

The requirements and series of acts of how to be a Korean woman that Sun Mee experiences here correspond with an established beauty myth, a socio-historical patriarchal construct that weds an outdated, hegemonic notion of femininity (emphasizing the value of physical and emotional fragility in women, of their social and economic reliance on men and compliance with male authority, of a pleasing outer appearance) to heteronormative claims on female sexuality.³¹¹ Though suffering from this patriarchal system, Chomet’s female family members have unwittingly agreed not only to follow its mythic rules of beauty but also to transmit them to Sun Mee and, by extension, to the younger female generation, to “normalize” their looks for “survival” and “success” in a highly gendered South Korean society. These requirements reflect South Korea’s

³¹⁰ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 27.

³¹¹ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

contemporary *look*-centered culture, in which highly commercialized cultural products, such as films, television dramas, and especially K-pop music videos have indoctrinated South Korean women to endorse the ideals of fabricated beauty, escalating the normalization of a culture of “lookism” as the standard for South Korean women who feel compelled to transform their bodies.³¹²

As a woman brought up in North America, Sun Mee is not considered “Korean female enough” by the standards of a patriarchal South Korean society that governs her biological mother and aunts. The feminine make-over project of Sun Mee’s female family members—to show their affection and make her become more acceptable to the given norms of South Korean society—contradicts her own ideas of gender, of living as an emancipated woman in the United States. To Sun Mee, these “how-to-*look*-like-a-Korean-woman” requirements are a recipe for oppression that, at the end of her journey, she does not accept, as she realizes the hollowness of trying to be a different person: “I try hard to put on this idea of what it means to be Korean. For my umma [mother] for my aunts and grandmother [...] but it’s not me.”³¹³ In her performance, Chomet visually contextualizes the deconstruction of what it means to be a Korean woman. After a hectic sequence of body movements, of draping on a scarf and hat, of dangling a purse, and of putting on high heel shoes—all performances that supposedly engender a “Korean woman”—Sun Mee suddenly stops and says “but it’s not me.” She then very slowly takes

³¹² Sharon Heijjin Lee, “The (Geo)Politics of Beauty: Race, Transnationalism, and Neoliberalism in South Korean Beauty Culture,” Doctoral Dissertation, University of Michigan, 2012, 44-57.

³¹³ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 28.

off her hat, scarf, and high heels and just looks straight out into the audience in silence. These quiet motions of removing the accouterments of Korean femaleness symbolize the stripping off of a culturally imposed gender script and the deconstruction of her temporary, superficial Korean womanness.

Chomet not only challenges gender scripts that she herself experienced; in a moving scene, she also discloses a sinister state-imposed gender script affecting both her and her biological mother. In the play, Sun Mee finds out that it was her great uncle and aunt—who were taking care of her in another city while her unwed mother was working in Seoul—that gave her up to the Holt Adoption Program. They did this out of fear of losing face because gossip implied that Sun Mee was the child of their promiscuous eighteen-year-old daughter. Holt then hid Sun Mee for six months in a South Korean foster family before sending her to the U.S. Her mother desperately went back to Holt several times to retrieve her daughter, but to no avail. As a single, unwed mother with no legal recourse, she was finally forced to give in and fell into a deep depression. Drawing on Orlando Patterson’s work on slavery, Hosu Kim compares the situation of South Korean birth mothers in the adoption process to the condition of “social death,” since the legal process of adoption deprives them of all custody rights (which are transferred to the adoption agency), effectively rendering them “dead-to-others.”³¹⁴ Chomet includes this scene not to sentimentalize motherly love but to expose the conspiratorial practices of Korean international adoption agencies. By bringing to light her mother’s story, Chomet

³¹⁴ Kim, *Birth Mothers and Transnational Adoption Practice in South Korea*, 8-10. Also see Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

exposes how a state-imposed gender script renders single unwed mothers powerless in a repressive patriarchal society that ostracizes them for having “chosen” to relinquish their children. In this regard, then, Chomet’s performance also brings the plight of biological mothers to light from the abyss of social stigma.

In *How to Be a Korean Woman*, after Sun Mee participates in the Korean TV program, looking for her biological family, sixteen people claim that they may be related to her. To find out whether a person is part of her biological family, Sun Mee prepares for a DNA test. “As music plays, SUN MEE takes one strand of hair, places in an imaginary baggie, puts on hand and blows it to the sky.”³¹⁵ This motion shows the importance of bodily materials such as a single hair to prove her blood tie and kinship. Chomet as a performer did not actually pull out a strand of her hair; however, the stylized action of plucking the single hair is the existential moment of liminality that her body counts on as an adoptee to prove both her “adoptee-ness” and “Koreanness” through bodily pain. The simplicity of the motion of pulling her hair thread is not just verbalized by her dialogue. Without any explanation of how to do the test, what it means to her, and what she envisages about its result, she quietly acts out the test preparation in slow motion. This slow motion becomes a ritualistic action which reflects her wish and longing to find her biological mother. In another scene in which Sun Mee receives a letter from her biological mother, she reacts to the actual letter, written by Chomet’s real-life biological mother, seen projected on the wall. As the audience hears her recorded reading of this letter, Sun Mee performs slow movements in silhouette. The perfectly controlled slowness of her body demonstrates her feelings of excitement, happiness, shock, sorrow,

³¹⁵ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 12.

and a yearning to physically see her mother. The spectacle of emotion that she embodies reacting to the letter from her biological mother is in alignment with the spectacle of the actual letter written in Korean. This juxtaposition between Chomet's bodily movement, the temporal slowness of its pace, and the mediated object defers giving the spectator any fixed answer.

At the end of her piece, before leaving for the U.S., Sun Mee finds comfort, freedom, and emotional belonging with other adoptees in Seoul who have created their own special community: "It was good to feel like myself again: like an outsider. Being in the margins felt familiar. It was my birth family's efforts to put me in the center, to *normalize* me, that was exhausting... They were trying to make me *pass*."³¹⁶ Among this group of other transnational "outsiders" in South Korea, Sun Mee finds an adoptee-centered space, sending the message to her audience that adoptees are not relegated to wander in a stateless space but, rather, can generate their own space of belonging.

Disclosing Class, Citizenship, and Kinship Scripts in Eric Sharp's *Middle Brother*

The director of the premiere of *Middle Brother*, Robert Rosen, stated "What struck me the most was the idea of an adoptee on a very intense personal journey whose story is hijacked by just about everyone he meets. Their stories seem to supersede his own and he is relegated to the position of caretaking or placating everyone else."³¹⁷ The temporal, spatial, and bodily hijackings in *Middle Brother* are theatricalized to tell Sharp's story, with all the characters in the production performed by pan-Asian cast members from Mu Performing Arts. The pan-Asian casting of the premiere *Middle*

³¹⁶ Chomet, *How to Be a Korean Woman*, 28.

³¹⁷ Robert Rosen, "Director's Notes," Playbill for *Middle Brother*, 5.

Brother at Mu represented solidarity between Asian Americans and Korean adoptees built upon Mu's commitment to the Asian American community.³¹⁸ In an interview, Sharp points out the special role that Mu held in creating *Middle Brother*: "we have a very special Midwestern Asian American aesthetic here that Mu is really responsible for and I feel so thankful to them. [...] That's the community but in terms of inspiration for *how* we worked on the play."³¹⁹ Mu has a twenty-year-long history of producing adoption theater starting with *Mask Dance* by Rick A. Shiomi and *The Walleye Kid* and its musical version (2005 and 2008) by Rick A. Shiomi and Sundraya Kase, to Katie Hae Leo's *Four Destinies* (2011). *Middle Brother* fits perfectly in Mu's trajectory of exploring the world of Korean adoption theater in the U.S., intersecting Korean adoptee artistic engagements of their diasporic life stories within Asian American theatrical experiences and enlivening their mutual solidarity. In addition, to offer background information for audiences, the playbill for this production features the timeline of Korean adoption written by Critical Adoption Studies scholar Kim Park Nelson and a glossary of Korean words that the characters in the play often use. Also included in the playbill is a quote by Korean

³¹⁸ Founded in 1992, Mu Performing Arts functions as the largest Asian American performing arts organization in the midwest producing "great performances born of arts, equality, and justice from the heart of the Asian American experience." Mu has been dedicated to playing this significant role of narrating Asian American stories through artistic exploration, experiment, and engagement with equality and social justice.

"Mission," *Mu Performing Arts*, accessed January 7, 2018,

<http://www.muperformingarts.org/mission/>.

³¹⁹ Eric Sharp, interview by author, Minneapolis, May 19, 2015.

adoptive playwright Katie Hae Leo who writes about her experience of growing up adopted and Asian in the 1980s Midwest and states the importance of Mu in their lives: “Mu Performing Arts’ commitment to producing plays for and by adoptees recognizes the power of seeing oneself represented through art for so many Minnesota adoptees and their families.”³²⁰ This substantial information about adoption shows Sharp and Mu’s respectful commitment to situate the Korean adoptee’s own experience at the center of theater arts and not use them in a simplistic (or exploitative) one-way storytelling narrative centered on adoptive parents’ point of view that often omits the complexity of transnational adoption practice and adoptees’ own voices.

In *Flexible Citizenship*, Aiwha Ong argues that due to advances in technology and transportation, transnational connection has increased in flexible mobility and nationhood.³²¹ Whereas Lichwick and Chomet’s plays show the facility of this transnational connection, what is interesting in Eric Sharp’s *Middle Brother* is that it not only shows the facility of this transnational connection, but also the temporal flexibility of the main character who goes back in forth in time and place. The choices of theatricalizing the transnational spaces where Billy’s experiences occur in the course of moving in between Korea and the U.S. expose the flexibility of transnational adoptees. In the production, Sharp shows this transnational mobility through an open spatial configuration of the set. At the beginning of the play, 한국 (Korea), 아이오와 (Iowa), and 태평양 (Pacific Ocean) are drawn on the floor with white chalk by members of the Chorus.

³²⁰ Playbill for *Middle Brother*, 7.

³²¹ Aiwha Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

Borrowing from classical Greek drama, Sharp creates an imaginary Chorus consisting of Korean only heavily accented men and women dressed in typical *jjimjil-bang* outfits. The Chorus interacts only with Billy, sometimes helping him with advice, other times criticizing or even mocking him. Using a cart-like chariot, actors and actresses dramatize this flexible mobility on stage to illustrate how Billy and the Chorus easily move back and forth between the two countries marked on the stage floor. When Billy goes to Korea, the Chorus brings the cart over to his side of the Pacific in Iowa (stage left) and wheels him over to the Korean side in Seoul (center stage and stage right). When the Chorus is addressing Billy and he needs help, they wheel over a small bridge and they crawl on top of it, over the Pacific Ocean, from Korea to Iowa.

Sharp also adds an element of temporal flexible mobility by aligning Billy's return journey with an imagined story of the Joseon Dynasty's ascending royal lineage. When he arrives in Korea, Billy sings a song in a *norae-bang* (노래방), a Korean private singing room where people go to sing songs and have fun. The popular culture experiences such as *jjimjil-bang* and *norae-bang* that Billy encounters in South Korean urban areas contrast with the fictionalized story of pre-modern Korean history. In the following scene, this contemporary cultural site is quickly transformed into a fantasized historical setting of Joseon period Korea with traditional Korean music and Korean royal family characters wearing *hanbok*.³²² To signify their presence at the royal court, actors embody theatricalized gestures such as bowing to the King and Queen and use florid

³²² The *hanbok* design costumes suggest a sense of temporality but are not of the Joseon period with newspapers printed directly on the fabric. *Hanbok* in this play functions as an imagined signifier of Korean tradition, culture, history, and royal lineage.

honorific speech showing Sharp's trans-historical imagination through mannerism and language. The scene then rapidly changes back to Billy in contemporary time. These quick-change scenes work well in terms of contesting the blurred line between Billy's imagination of a past and his present-day reality that Sharp draws to evoke the fragile demarcation of temporal mobility. Imagining spatial and temporal flexibility in this play not only disrupts the spatial stability and temporal linearity as Billy as an adoptee searches for belonging across time and space, but also magnifies the liminal state of being in between Korea and the U.S. and in between past and present.

Sharp invites us to view his play in which spatial and temporal flexibility are transnationally and trans-historically fluid but in which kinship and citizenship demarcations are rigidly formed and enforced. In contrast to spatial and temporal flexibility, configuring kinship and citizenship in both Korea and the U.S. requires an adoptee to conform to rigid regulations and even extreme acts such as, on the one side, the presentation of their *hojuk* (호적) to prove their "real" Korean name when adoptees return to Korea and, on the other side, the rejection of their name to prove their "American" identity and discarding "old" Korean customs and learning "new" American ways when they are adopted in the U.S.³²³ Billy experiences this rigidity to conform his identity to be either American or Korean across time and space. The opening scene shows Billy in his apartment practicing speaking basic Korean, quite badly. Billy tells the

³²³ The *hojuk* family registry system was terminated in 2008 as it allowed only the father of a child to set its name in the registry. See Kristi Brian, *Reframing Transracial Adoption: Adopted Korean, White Parents, and the Politics of Kinship* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 31.

Chorus that his return to Korea plan is simple: “Find an apartment. [...] Get a job. [...] Eat Korean barbecue. [...] Apply for a visa, learn Korean, then walk around and blend into society.”³²⁴ The Chorus responds by mocking him, marking the first time that Billy’s issue of belonging is put forward, CHORUS 4: “Oh look at me. I am Billy and I’m blending in to Korean society.”³²⁵ What seemed like a perfectly logical plan to Billy, who sees himself as Korean, is considered absurd by “real” Koreans who understand the experiences of Korean American adoptees who return to Korea and find the hard reality that they are viewed as “Korean foreigners” within Korea.³²⁶ The Chorus also brings up the matter of citizenship, telling Billy that he must bring his U.S. citizenship naturalization documents to prove that he, in fact, is *not* Korean and that his name is no longer on the *hojuk* in order to apply for a long-term visa:

BILLY: Hojuk, hojuk... Okay, what’s a hojuk?

CHORUS 3: Korean family registry. You no longer part of family.

You no longer Korean person. You now American person.

Please prove that you are not Korean person.³²⁷

The information given by the Chorus is significant in that in order for Korean children to become legally adoptable in terms of U.S. Immigration Law, they must first gain “orphan status,” as Kim writes: “For adoptees, an ‘orphan *hojuk*,’ or orphan registry, served to render the child as a legible, free-standing subject of the state in preparation for adoption

³²⁴ Eric Sharp, *Middle Brother*, unpublished play, 2014, 7.

³²⁵ Ibid.

³²⁶ Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 177.

³²⁷ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 7.

and erasure as a Korean Citizen.”³²⁸ Kim continues by stating that when some adoptees decided to apply for “the overseas Koreans visa” they were told they had never been taken out of their birth family registry, and “in order to qualify for the visa, they must complete their own erasure from the registry and cancel their Korean citizenship.”³²⁹ In other words, Korean adoptees’ affirmation of their Korean citizenship, or legal recognition by the Korean government, is juxtaposed with the negation of Koreanness represented by the family register. For adoptees, *hojuk* is thus a marker of destabilizing belonging-hood as a Korean citizen and in a Korean family just as U.S. Naturalization papers are the stamp of a Korean adoptee who was endorsed as “American.” For both

³²⁸ Eleana J. Kim, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien: Transnational Adoptees as Specters of Foreignness and Family in South Korea,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 80, no. 2 (2007): 521. <http://muse.jhu.edu/article/217111>.

³²⁹ Kim, “Our Adoptee, Our Alien,” 521. Park Nelson gives more precision regarding the overseas Koreans visa: “The F-4 visa is the least restrictive of any residence visa in Korea, conferring on the holder all the rights of native Korean except voting, including unlimited entry and exit privileges, the right to own property and businesses, and the right to reside in Korea without a work-related sponsor. Although the F-4 has a two-year term, unlimited renewals are possible. An F-4 visa is as close to citizenship as a noncitizen can have. [...] Since 2011, Korean adoptees who have permanent residence status in Korea (most commonly with an F-4 visa) can also apply for dual South Korean citizenship. [...] Adoptee dual citizens are exempt from the compulsory military service required for male citizens, and are not required to relinquish the citizenship of their adoptive countries.”

See Park Nelson, *Invisible Asians*, 162-3.

Korean and U.S. authorities, kinship, citizenship, and belonging are mutually connected, and this triad of identification is a contested site of adoptee-ness that requires demarcated confirmation by bureaucratic “objecthood” such as mere paperwork. In *Middle Brother*, the dramatization of this ironic reality that a transnational adoptee who decides to stay in Korea faces, is a contestation of romanticizing flexible mobility with which adoptees are often associated. This “de-Koreanization” engenders a liminal belonging in Billy’s legal and familial position, an issue that is consistently seen throughout the play and gradually increases his insecurity. In fact, Billy’s embodiment of liminal belonging accentuates a sense of complete statelessness, that he belongs in neither country.

Even though *Middle Brother* tells a story about a Korean adoptee’s birth search and reunion, it differs from Lichwick and Chomet’s works in its fantasy-like quality, as the plot of Billy’s journey is mirrored throughout the play by a tale of two brothers during the Joseon Dynasty. After arriving in Korea, Billy visits the Korean adoption agency through which he was placed for adoption and receives very little information about his biological parents and adoption history; however, he is stunned to find out that he has an older brother he never knew existed. This realization is a trigger for the first in a series of fantasy scenes in which Billy places himself, set in an imaginary royal court of the Joseon Dynasty. These fantasy scenes show the contrast of the opulent royal family’s life with Billy’s working class life in Iowa, and especially his Korean older brother’s miserable life in Korea. Billy’s biological brother, Young-Nam as a child, suffered temporary memory loss from a bicycle accident and was sent to a boy’s home, forced to make “shoes every day for eleven years.”³³⁰ In the Joseon trans-historical world, however, as

³³⁰ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 37.

the eldest brother, Young-Nam is next in line to become King. Sharp stated that this type of fantasy exists or is often told to Korean adoptees: “the other part of this *Middle Brother* idea is that many adoptees are told or we have these fantasies that we are from this royal lineage.”³³¹ Through this fantasy, Billy re-invents his own lineage to attempt to “regain” his name and a sense of belonging. Sharp reveals this to us a scene where Billy, as an invisible observer, witnesses the queen’s last-minute labor delivering a baby, a son, second in line to the throne: himself born of royalty.

In contrast to this royal life, Sharp reveals the mirrored downtrodden life of Billy’s two brothers, Gabe in the U.S. and Young-Nam in Korea. Billy and Gabe grew up together as adoptive brothers, but Gabe did not seem to adapt to the fact that he was adopted. From either quitting or getting fired from dead-end jobs to drinking at bars, Gabe, who used to be a good student up until sixth grade, just gave up. Even though Young-Nam as an adult has reconnected with his biological parents, he still has difficulty holding jobs and sustaining relationships, and spends his time drinking and smoking. When Billy goes back to Korea for the second time, Young-Nam has lost his apartment and is now living in a *jjimjil-bang*. Billy’s mobility across time and space serves as an act of configuring a compositional kinship in the different but mirrored wretched lives that the two brothers experience. To be specific, Billy plays the role of a builder of this brotherhood in which he is both an older brother in the U.S. and a younger brother in Korea. Sharp dramatizes this interim relationship of navigating between the two brothers cross-nationally in a scene where Billy is absent yet very present in the minds of his two brothers. In a bar scene, Gabe and Young-Nam share the stage but in different bars, one

³³¹ Sharp, interview by author.

in Waterloo, Iowa and the other in Hanam, Korea. When Gabe is drinking and speaking in the Iowa bar, Young-Nam plays the part of the bartender but faces upstage. When Gabe stops talking, he switches places with Young-Nam who drinks and Gabe plays the bartender facing upstage. Both brothers separately narrate a story about Billy. Gabe enviously talks about Billy's intelligence and Young-Nam imagines Billy's "hardship" living in the middle of white people in Iowa and wishes that they will meet again in Korea in the future. Through this scene, Sharp not only creates this idea of a land in-between, where Billy the middle brother is the subject of discussion, but also demonstrates the deep-rooted effects of adoption, separation, and a sense of loss through the characters of both Gabe and Young-Nam who compose this transnational kinship in progress.

Examining the mechanisms of making an unwanted Korean orphan into a desirable adoptee, ingrained into U.S. militarism and neocolonial power in the framework of transnational adoption, SooJin Pate argues that "the orphan's body was subjected to different methods of biopower—techniques and procedures that governed life and subjugated bodies and that worked to protect the health and appearance of incoming orphans so that they may be made useful (that is, adoptable)."³³² Biopower, as seen in the play through body and language, is the means of indoctrination for adoptees to be re-Koreanized into belonging; their bodies and "tongues" are under scrutiny to be

³³² Pate, *From Orphan to Adoptee*, 103. The concept of biopower is taken from Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol.1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 140-5. In this book, Foucault theorizes biopower asserting that power is made up not only by disciplining bodies but also by regulating populations.

disciplined into Korean culture. In a Korean Air flight scene that Billy dreams about, he and Gabe become a disciplined body following the female Korean flight attendants' specific instructions. The two flight attendants, sporting epitomized Korean Air flight attendant perfect outfits and impeccable mannerisms, extend a "special greeting to Billy and Gabe," on behalf of the captain.³³³ While Billy and Gabe talk to one another, the two attendants perform a "ritual dance in lieu of going through the various safety features verbally."³³⁴ The two women then interrupt Billy and Gabe by training them with "special" verbal instructions for when they meet their biological family in Korea:

Your seat cushion can be used as a weapon to suffocate your family members. [...] Korean Airlines would like to remind you that Hanguk mal [Korean] is the official language of your home country. By speaking English, you are causing your ancestors pain. [...] In the unlikely event you know two shits about your culture, you would realize that your older brother should be referred to as hyung-nim as a sign of respect.³³⁵

The attendants then take ahold of Billy and, in a dance-like ritual, give him more special instructions for when he reunites with his biological father. "When the abbeoji [father] light is illuminated, please bow in that very specific way that you were never taught to bow. Helpful hint: If you think you're low enough to the ground—go even lower."³³⁶ One of the attendants physically forces him to bow almost to the ground. "It is against Korean

³³³ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 51.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51-3.

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 54.

federal regulations to drink soju in front of your abbeoji. Please turn you [sic] red face away while getting drunk with family members.”³³⁷ The two attendants use their hands to force Billy’s face away. This ritual dance forcing Billy’s body to morph into Korean cultural standards with which he is not familiar is a reflection of his fear and anxiety of reuniting with his biological family, having to accustom himself to Korean culture, and undergoing cultural regulations in his birth land in order to be accepted. Kim states that many adoptees who fantasize about returning to Korea to find “true familial or ethnic belonging,” also suffer anguish about a return journey due to the “fear of experiencing a second rejection.”³³⁸

Billy is frustrated in his obligation to follow the regulatory customs of Korean cultural formality and also in his brother’s refusal to talk to him about the past: “I don’t get it, Hyung. We spent all this time catching up with abbeoji [father], but the past is still off limits. When can I ask the big questions?”³³⁹ Young-Nam answers: “There are things I can only tell you when we speak the same language.”³⁴⁰ In using Billy’s body as a spectacle, Sharp displays not only Billy’s bodily transformation under these disciplinary guidelines but also his punishment in being excluded from answers because of his lack of Korean language skills. Sharp sees language as the practice of shaping adoptees’ liminal state, showing the differentiating process between Korean orphans and de-Koreanized adoptees. In a flashback scene, Billy is transported to 1980s Waterloo, Iowa where he

³³⁷ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 54.

³³⁸ Kim, *Adopted Territory*, 186.

³³⁹ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 55.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

meets a young Gabe for the first time—both wearing the same orphanage garbs. The Chorus puts a large white placard around his neck with his written Korean name, 안영재, crossed out in red marker and his “new given” adoptee name, Billy, written underneath. When Korean adoptees are forced to renounce their Korean names, they give up their entire genealogy. Here, name, as a written form that represents a person’s identity, becomes an indicator for adoptees to inscribe their new adoptive culture and customs into their new self; however, losing one’s birth name and heritage only renders belonging even more unattainable. Billy realizes that even though they are not blood related, they have been adopted together, and since, he says, adoptive parents usually prefer adoptees that are young and healthy, their situation is “special.” Billy’s fear of relinquishment and non-belonging make him desperate to be accepted and he instructs Gabe to give up speaking Korean, to only speak English, and eat any foods they are given, even if bland in taste. Acculturation signifies being a “good” adoptee, but in order to assimilate in the U.S. adoptees (as represented by Billy and Gabe in the play) must negate all that which summons language, taste, and memories of Korea, thus self-disciplining themselves into belonging. The integration into American culture and new given home that Billy feels needs to occur is mirrored by his yearning for English. Gabe calls Billy by his Korean name and Billy hastily hushes him up as if Gabe said a taboo word. Language is a cultural apparatus of producing, reproducing, and developing one’s self in a literate society; however, this act of being obligated to acquire a language skill for one’s identification can be read as compulsory force against adoptees’ tongues to endow them with a brand new label: American. Billy internalizes this unavoidable need to be an American speaker and constraints his Korean adoptive brother to abandon not only his

Korean language but also his desire for Korean food. This scene expresses how the mother tongue and the actual palatal tongue related to Koreanness are relegated to the Americanness of the English language and “tasteless” American food. The scene also exposes an invisible hostility, treating their liminal position as a malleable platform to mold their body and language from being a Korean to becoming an American.

Billy’s return journey is filled with unexpected obstacles in language and culture that make him realize that he will never be able to fully belong or be accepted in his birth country; as Sharp states: “I think it’s this idea that you want with every fiber of your being to connect to these people, to this country, but you can’t.”³⁴¹ In a market scene in Seoul, Chorus members playing street vendors tell Billy that he is not blending in because, after having lived in Korea for one year, he still does not know how to speak the language, not “even make one sentence in Korean.”³⁴² His inability to blend in comes to a climax toward the end of the play. The queen in the Joseon Dynasty fantasy (Billy’s imagined biological mother) tells Billy that if he recounts his entire tale he will be able to take the throne; but Billy is unable to, because he cannot speak Korean.³⁴³ Billy, who had successfully self-disciplined into learning American language as a young boy, fails to re-discipline himself to learn his birth country’s language and thus loses not only his proper lineage to the royal family but also his sense of belonging as he finds himself relegated in between the past and the present. The ending of Billy’s story offers a somewhat disheartening resolution, instead of the anticipated happy and uplifting one, to reflect the

³⁴¹ Sharp, interview by author.

³⁴² Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 27-8.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 67.

view of the search and reunion quest as part of an ambiguous process that leaves many adoptees in a state of non-belonging. No matter how much Billy wants and tries to belong, he will still remain an outsider.

Testimony and Witnessing

According to Oh, “international adoption is a story of dualisms. Procedurally and ideologically, Korean and international adoption operated simultaneously at two levels: the national and the individual, the public and the private, the global and the everyday.”³⁴⁴ Lichwick and Chomet effectively restage international adoptees’ complex bodily and emotional experiences of border-crossing for their audiences and thus destabilize the dualistic demarcations between South Korea and the United States, between lived experiences and constructed myths, and between reality and fiction. Through their constant bodily transitions from self to other, from present to past, from one culture to another, these performers effectively collapse such binaries and underline the power of fluid transformation that their very being as Korean American women adoptees enables them to accomplish.

Lichwick’s and Chomet’s bodies are not only a theatrical medium for expressing the fluidity of their multiple personifications but also perceptive interpreters of transnational adoption experiences based on their own life stories. As Esther Kim Lee states about Asian American solo performers, “for all of these performers, their physical presence on stage was a statement on its own; no one could dispute the authenticity and realness of their bodies and personal histories.”³⁴⁵ Thus, the solo performance element in

³⁴⁴ Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea*, 209.

³⁴⁵ Lee, *A History of Asian American Theatre*, 171.

both *Yellow Dress* and *How to Be a Korean Woman* is fundamental because the performers' bodies not only channel the chain of events marking their pre- and post-adoption experiences, but also serve to make critical statements about these events and practices in the coeval time of the performance. The very personal and powerful nature of their bodily statements about the politically and culturally embedded issue of adoption allows audiences to experience a form of theatrical testimony, transforming the spectators into witnesses to the complex gender and racial scripts that underlie the liminal experience of adoption from the adoptees' point of view. Giving testimony is vital for these two artists: their performances testify to the validity of their experiences, rendering them in image, motion, and sound so that they can be shared with others. As Lichwick and Chomet testify to the traumas and entanglements of transnational adoption in public and in performance, the impact of their testimony is enhanced by the immediacy and intimacy that can effectively be exercised in live theatre.

Chomet's testifying works carry the hope and potential of engendering empathy in the witnessing spectators; particularly, audience members who themselves had undergone a transnational adoption experience reacted strongly. When Chomet performed her piece at the 2013 International Korean Adoptee Associations (IKAA) gathering, she was besieged by audience members who, in her own words, were "crying and so emotional and I just didn't understand why people would want to feel all that; but especially adoptees said that it's articulated in the play, the inner life of the adoptees that they don't often talk about to their families and that they often can't articulate to themselves."³⁴⁶ By becoming witnesses to Chomet's lived experiences, adoptee

³⁴⁶ Chomet, interview by author.

spectators perceive their own experiences reflected in a stylized performance that validates and values their unexpressed identity. They also come to understand that the status quo of silence as acquiescence is not a script that they are obligated to follow: they, too, can express like Chomet and try to find healing and closure as well.

For non-adoptee audiences, their conversion into witnesses is essential to engendering a critical understanding of the emotions and issues that transnational adoption entails—a crucial step for enabling a more complex and critical perception of international adoption and for mobilizing support for redress. When asked what kind of public impact she desired when performing *How to Be a Korean Woman*, Chomet answered: “just to change people’s idea about adoption, and just kind of crack open the complexity about it.”³⁴⁷ She continued to specify, “the impact is just [...] *flipping the script*. It’s like having a person come into the theatre and thinking one thing and having them leave and be like, I can never think about this topic the same way again.”³⁴⁸ In addition, these performances draw attention to the need for concrete policy changes. For more than fifty years, South Korean government policies have been both pro-adoption and hostile to adoptees and their biological families; thus, thousands of Koreans have not found redress, even when victimized by unethical and fraudulent adoption agency practices. Not only should the judicial system scrutinize adoption practices more closely, but there should be legislative change as well, particularly with regard to the legal status

³⁴⁷ Chomet, interview by author.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

of single mothers.³⁴⁹ Most importantly, South Korea should recognize the birth rights of adoptees, so as to stop the discrimination they currently face in the workforce and educational system in South Korea. The United States should likewise ensure that the citizenship rights of adoptees cannot be threatened by deportation.³⁵⁰ Overall, there needs to be consciousness-raising activities from all concerned to increase awareness and sensitivity to the specific challenges faced by interracial adoptive families. Change must occur not only in the courts but also in the hearts and minds of both South Korean and North American people. Finally, as Korean American adoptees are beginning to address the abuses of the adoption business between South Korea and the United States and explore the tensions and trauma that mark this liminal experience, the international adoption trade between China, Ethiopia, and other countries with the United States still awaits investigation,³⁵¹ and the voices of other international adoptees are waiting to be heard to testify to their own adoption experiences on stage.

³⁴⁹ See the petition to the Government of South Korea, “Declaration Calling For An Immediate End To The Industrial International Adoption System From South Korea,” accessed April 21, 2018, <https://koreanadoptiondeclaration.wordpress.com/>.

³⁵⁰ See Choe Sang-hun, “Deportation a ‘Death Sentence’ to Adoptees After a Lifetime in the U.S.,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/02/world/asia/south-korea-adoptions-phillip-clay-adam-crapser.html>.

³⁵¹ In 2015 the top five countries sending children to the United States for adoption were (in descending order): China, Ethiopia, South Korea, Ukraine, and Uganda. For discussion of the problems of adoption policy in China, see Kay Ann Johnson, *China’s*

The personal is political. Second-wave feminists have already acknowledged this important message since the 1960s in the U.S. An individual's relationship with culture, society, history, or other individuals is mutually affected by a macroscopic structure of the society and culture that the person resides in. On a microcosmic level, taste, emotion, behavior, habit, knowledge, and ways of thinking connect to the political structure that shapes the individual's identity, position, and experiences. Korean adoptee activist scholar Kim Stoker envisions this mutuality between art and politics in the

Hidden Children: Abandonment, Adoption, and the Human Costs of the One-Child Policy (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016). For problematics of the adoption trade between Ethiopia and the U.S., consider the systemic issues of armed conflict, famine, and diseases ravaging the African country and orphaning millions of children. Consider also the abuses of this situation by U.S. adoption services employees. See Anthony Mitchell, "Ethiopia Puts Its Young Up For Adoption," *Washington Post*, January 2, 2005, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/2005/01/02/ethiopia-puts-its-young-up-for-adoption/5c51dcc4-bef7-4020-a95b-cbf96cac9917/?utm_term=.183ad8199706. See "Four Employees of Adoption Services Provider Charged with Conspiracy to Defraud the United States in Connection with Ethiopia Operations," *The United States Department of Justice*, February 11, 2014, accessed March 24, 2018, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/four-employees-adoption-services-provider-charged-conspiracy-defraud-united-states-connection>. See also Mirah Riben, "Adoption Criminality and Corruption," *Huffington Post*, January 13, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mirah-riben/adoption-crimes-and-corru_b_6467540.html.

artistic expression of international adoption by the adoptee artists.³⁵² Stoker stresses the activist feature of art that should be expanded to politicize for social transformation and sensitivity about social issues as a way of deconstructing the obsolescence within knowledge about international adoption and constructing new knowledge. In *Yellow Dress*, for example, uncovering Lichwick's experience of child molestation at the Korean orphanage she was in is a formation of activism within her theatrical testimony. Her personification of her child self brings out the issue of sexual harassment against children. The embodiment of her own child self and memory recalls the state of being an orphan that Lichwick, as an adoptee, once underwent in her lifetime. This memory is summoned not just to theatricalize the horror and injustice that happened to her in childhood but to have the audience consider the systematic adoption industry structure between Korea and the U.S. and its hidden practice of violating the rights of children. In other words, Lichwick's embodiment of the memory of orphanage life and sexual molestation is her artistic call to attention to unjust activities.

³⁵² Politicity is a term coined by Paulo Freire: "Politicity is nothing but the quality of being political." See Paulo Freire, Ana Maria Araújo Freire, and Walter de Oliveira, *Pedagogy of Solidarity* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 31. By analyzing the visual works by Mihee-Nathalie Lemoine and Kate Hers, Kim Stoker unfolds her argument that an artistic product is a form of activism, which reveals a cultural activist force within the artistic narratives of international adoption. See Kim Stoker, "Beyond Identity: Activism in Korean Adoptee Art," *Duksung Women's University Journal* 34 (Seoul: Duksung Women's University, 2005): 223-248.

With regard to this idea of flipping the script, Sharp stated in an interview: “I’m really trying to have them think about what’s actually happened to adoptees, and to do it in a way it doesn’t feel it’s being beaten over the head with it. [...] That’s why his name is Billy and it’s not me, it gives me that distance.”³⁵³ Distancing himself from his own memory by creating fictional characters based on his autobiographical experiences, Sharp’s strategy envisions how adoptees can create artistic works in which the artists themselves can laugh with audiences to be entertained and think about adoption without being overly occupied about the rigid dualistic demarcations between being an adoptee and an artist, between an actor and a playwright, and thus between Billy and Sharp. Sharp explains that adoptee art should not be surmised as only autobiographical storytelling: “we [adoptee artists] need to be able to make comments about adoption that are not based entirely on fact. [...] That’s what I want to have happen as an artist. [...] I want that side to grow as well, but the art can’t just stay in this place where it’s just biographical.”³⁵⁴ His birth search and reunion narrative incorporates the creation of an imagined Joseon Dynasty world and navigates between the U.S. and Korea, present and past, real and imagined. By exercising his imagination freed from the first-person narrative, Sharp overcomes a factual representation of narrating or documenting the adoptee experience and shows a different position of adoptee art.

Middle Brother does not explicitly exhibit a political message or an intention to raise awareness about sensitive issues surrounding adoption; however, I believe that the play definitely implies a veiled politicacy through which audiences feel Billy’s frustration

³⁵³ Sharp, interview by author.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

and anguish about his and his brother's loss and how he seeks a sense of justice, especially in the repetition of a specific question Billy asks three times in three different scenes. When Billy reunites with his biological brother in Korea for the first time, he asks him: "Why didn't you look for me?"³⁵⁵ At the end of the flashback scene when Billy's brother was just found and transported to a Boy's Home, Billy asks: "Why didn't our parents look for him?" And in the following historical fantasy scene when the royal court figures realize that the older brother is missing, Billy yells: "Why didn't you look for him? He's in Saint Andrew Kim's Boys Home. It's just one town over. Why didn't you look for him? Why didn't you look for me?"³⁵⁶ This reiteration of why nobody tried to find the missing boys puts forth the issue of Korea's lack of a social safety system for children and Korean society's ready acceptance of just giving up "lost" children to orphanages as waiting stations for possible profitable transnational adoption.³⁵⁷ In this

³⁵⁵ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 31.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 40.

³⁵⁷ Since the 1990s there has been an effort to decrease the number of children and infants put up for adoption outside of Korea through the use of public advertisement encouraging domestic adoption, and through social welfare support for unwed, single, and/or teenage mothers and poor/working-class families. With institutional support, concepts of kinship and citizenship should change to a more inclusive and diverse formation beyond a society obsessed with the normalization of family-oriented, blood-related, and genealogically-proven structures. For more information on criticisms about normatized Korean family structure and government policy, see Hee-kyoung Kim, *Strange Normal Family* (이상한 정상가족, *esanghan jeongsang gajok*) (Seoul: Dongasia, 2018).

sense, the cloaked politicized alluded to through this recurrence of the questions alerts audiences about Korean society that lost both brothers.

Scrutinizing “the relation between emotions and (in)justice, as a way of rethinking what it is that emotions do,”³⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed conceptualizes restorative justice which “has allowed the return of ‘emotions’ to the scene of justice in a way that is about dealing with the complex effects of injustice on social life as well as individual lives.”³⁵⁹ In an interview, Sharp said that his goal for *Middle Brother* was to have people gain an understanding of what it feels like to be separated from their own family when it’s not their choice and to depict the confused feelings that adoptees have when they go back to Korea where they feel they should belong but are not fully accepted.³⁶⁰ That is, theatrical art, a representational art form which invites audiences to be, think, and feel together in an actual space, in this play conveys the need to view Korean adoption as a personal as well as a political issue. The repeated questions in the play sound an alarm for a Korean society in which child labor and transnational adoption were justified because of poverty and inequality that an economic progress-driven society as a whole could not accept. As a way of seeking a remedy to cure the wounded past of Billy and his brothers, Sharp repeats these questions to give a feeling of urgency to audiences, and Korean society at large, about the need to answer for justice to rise.

In an email interview with *KoreAm*, Sharp answers the question about his plans to stage *Middle Brother* outside of Minnesota, saying that “the eventual goal is to tour the

³⁵⁸ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 191.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁶⁰ Sharp, interview by author.

play in South Korea. And not as a charity project to raise awareness about international adoption. I hope that is one of the byproducts, but the real reason is that as an actor and playwright, I want to be paid to do something in Korea, besides teaching English.”³⁶¹ His goal is not just a dream but a project that he has been working on.³⁶² This ongoing project of staging this play in Korea would allow Billy to find an answer to those repeated and unanswered questions with a Korean audience. Without being a consciousness-raising activity, *Middle Brother* would offer Korean audiences a chance to think about the interdependent relationship between transnational adoption, the Korean capitalistic society, and its contemporary history seen through an artistic imagination that incorporates actual liminal experiences of the adoptee pertaining to race, class, gender, citizenship, kinship, and belonging. Through the artistic imagination of his play *Middle Brother* from an adoptee’s point of view, Sharp will be able to bring to Korea an empathetic understanding of the Korean American transnational adoption experience and the reality of adoptees’ “homecoming” across temporal and spatial borders.

³⁶¹ Eric Sharp interview by Reera Yoo, “Eric Sharp Draws on His Personal Adoptee Experiences for Debut Play ‘Middle Brother,’” *KoreAm*, September 5, 2014, <http://kore.am/eric-sharp-draws-on-his-personal-adoptee-experiences-for-debut-play-middle-brother/>. *KoreAm* is an online hub composed of pertinent news stories and videos focusing on Asian America, with subjects ranging from popular culture and political issues to sports and communities. See <http://kore.am/>.

³⁶² The U.S.-based Korean playwright Hansol Jung, whose play *Among the Dead* premiered in New York in 2016 produced by the Ma-Yi Theater Company, translated *Middle Brother* into Korean.

Ahmed emphasizes that “justice involves feelings, which move us across the surfaces of the world, creating ripples in the intimate contours of our lives. Where we go, with these feelings, remains an open question.”³⁶³ At the very end of the play, Young-Nam tells Billy that none of their family members ever told him that Billy had been relinquished, and that they destroyed all traces of him: “All your pictures. All your clothes. Vanished.”³⁶⁴ In answer to his repeated questions about Billy’s disappearance, they would avoid looking at Young-Nam and just say that Billy was “in a better place.”³⁶⁵ In this trans-Pacific-scape between Korea and the United States imagined on stage, the ending of the play, with its unsatisfying answer about Billy’s questions and unachieved sense of justice, leaves the audiences both in the U.S. and in Korea with open questions about Billy’s and other adoptees’ past, present, and future after their birth search and reunion with their biological family. As the lights fade out on the stage the open-ended questions are now brought to light for us to answer on our side of the story.

Conclusion

Lichwick’s *Yellow Dress*, Chomet’s *How to Be a Korean Woman*, and Sharp’s *Middle Brother* not only provide a more complex picture of international adoption and becoming part of the Korean diaspora, but they do so from the adoptees’ perspective, giving voice to their own and other adoptees’ experiences. In their performances, adoptees are no longer the objects of national ideologies and international transactions but become the subjects and authors of their own stories and liminal experiences. In this

³⁶³ Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 202.

³⁶⁴ Sharp, *Middle Brother*, 68.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

manner, the three artists open up a realm of critical discussion of what it means to be an international adoptee of color in the U.S. and what aspects of international adoption practices should be reexamined on the basis of their shared but different experience and knowledge. Chomet emphasizes that dramatic fiction and performative testimony about transnational adoption “not only has the greatest story that’s interesting for people to hear but has the story that will actually liberate you.”³⁶⁶ In these Korean American adoptees’ autobiographical stories of transnational adoption, performance itself becomes an epistemological, ethical, political, diasporic act of resistance and transformation for international adoptees and audiences to find truth and reconciliation.³⁶⁷

³⁶⁶ Chomet, interview by author.

³⁶⁷ See “Position Statement,” *Truth and Reconciliation for the Adoption Community of Korea*, accessed June 11, 2017, <https://justicespeaking.wordpress.com/objective%EB%AA%A9%EC%A0%81/position-statement>.

CONCLUSION

In 2011 and 2012, the K-pop singer Psy's song "Gangnam Style" spread over the entire world. "Gangnam Style" hit an unprecedented one billion views on YouTube and popularized worldwide the notion of Korean chic. The music video also renewed interest in South Korea's *Hallyu* (한류), a wave of influence of Korean media products that extended throughout Asian and Western countries.³⁶⁸ Under the Korean Wave, not only South Korean popular cultural products such as K-pop and TV dramas but also tangible products such as cosmetics and food have swept around the world, gaining in popularity. In New York City, the 2017 Off-Broadway musical *KPOP*, written by Korean diasporic playwright Jason Kim, received much media attention for its spectacular production, glamorous K-pop dances and enthralling music in an immersive setting.³⁶⁹ The musical

³⁶⁸ See Suk-Young Kim's recent publication, *K-pop Live: Fans, Idols, and Multimedia Performance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2018); *Hallyu 2.0: The Korean Wave in the Age of Social Media*, eds. Sangjoon Lee and Abé Mark Nornes (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015); *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, eds. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

³⁶⁹ "'KPOP' Hits Off Broadway," *New Yorker*, September 4, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/09/04/kpop-hits-off-broadway>; Ben Brantley, "'KPOP' Sings and Dances Its Way Through a Divided Culture," *New York Times*, September 22, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/22/theater/kpop-musical-review.html>; Sara Holdren, "*KPOP* Is Gangnam Style With Substance Beneath," *Vulture*,

digs deep inside the K-pop industry, which at its inception was constructed within the cultural boundaries of Korea and after achieving international success redefined its identity by repositioning itself somewhere in between Korea, Asia, and the global. The staging of *KPOP*, as it moves actors and audiences through rooms on two levels of a loft theatre space, raises critical issues about nationalism, commercialism, the exploitative use of the body (plastic surgery, weight and birth control, cosmetic obsession, prescription drug abuse) underneath the dazzling façade of the K-pop star-making system. Although the musical focuses on the K-pop industry and its mechanisms, this play is closely connected to Korean diasporic art's interrogation of transnational dis/association with Korean culture and ideas regarding race, gender, ethnicity, and nationality. It is in this regard that Korean diasporic performances, such as *KPOP*, remap social constructions and reformulate identities that are part of diasporic experiences of liminal belonging.

Theater and performance are two engaging and compelling ways of understanding what the Korean diaspora is, what has driven Koreans to live outside their "homeland," and what sometimes urges them to return there. The nine theater and performance works discussed in this dissertation are manifestations of this transnational mobility and identity that the Korean diaspora embodies. However, analyzing the performances accomplishes a great deal more: we are presented with a unique perspective on the diaspora's experiences of liminal belonging in the U.S. Moreover, we begin to see how diasporic

September 22, 2017, <http://www.vulture.com/2017/09/theater-review-kpop-is-gangnam-style-with-substance-beneath.html>; Oliva Clement, "What Do Critics Think of KPOP Off-Broadway," *Playbill*, September 25, 2017, <http://www.playbill.com/article/what-do-critics-think-of-kpop-off-broadway>.

entities and communities claim identities, challenge stereotypes, and contest the notions of flexible transnationality, kinship, citizenship, and nationality.

As an interdisciplinary exploration that borrowed both constructs and methodological approaches from Theater and Performance Studies, Women's Studies, Critical Adoption Studies, Korean Studies, and Asian American Studies, this dissertation has provided insights about the Korean diaspora which—like many other diasporas—exists and functions in an environment of contested liminal belonging. Korean diasporic identity is created at the complex intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, and molded by systematic oppression. The performances analyzed here thus open a window onto a more nuanced view of society, community, history, and memory and what meaning these institutions or constructs have within and beyond twenty-first-century North America. In view of the above and because members of any diaspora will seek to define their own identities, any description of diasporic identity will be one of multiplicity and diversity, not homogenized stereotypes. This exploration of the theater and performances of the Korean diaspora therefore offers the idea that while diaspora may be a by-product of the forces of globalization, it is potentially that globalization's strongest antidote. Diasporic people may be displaced, but they bring with them the knowledge of their transnational liminal experiences that often bestows on them greater perception about their hostland and "homeland" due to their new outsider-within status. As the conveyors of change, the artists of the diaspora are able to express this perception through their experiences and bring about a new understanding of our world from their vantage point.

This research examined the performances of the Korean diaspora in three parts: Korean diasporic family and the meaning of a hopeful home as a site of liminal belonging; Korean diasporic woman's body whose liminal quality diversifies the idea of belonging in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, spirituality, and spatiality, and imagines a utopic community; and Korean adoptees' embodiment of their liminal experiences in their pre- and post-transnational adoption stories complicating the position of the Korean diaspora and its belonging of race, gender, class, citizenship, and kinship.

In Chapter 1, I argued that the home of the Korean diaspora imagined in the three plays becomes a space that intersects with history, race, and culture, thus engendering a liminal belonging. The concept of liminal belonging as a configuration of the Korean diaspora in the theatrical works not only problematizes the limitation of duality of the Korean diaspora—to be either Korean or American—but also reveals a sense of becoming. In the three family plays, the embodiment of Korean cultural experiences transforms the home into a trans-historical, interracial, and cross-cultural space. This polymorphous structure of Korean diasporic home transgresses the boundaries of belonging and memories and nullifies the fantasy of the American dream and model minority myth but still disseminates a sense of hope for the Korean diasporic families.

In Chapter 2, I analyzed how the three Korean women performance artists use their bodies to de-territorialize heteronormative, gendered, racialized and/or capitalized compositions of ethnic and sexual, spiritual and spatial belonging perpetuated by the normalization of myths in the U.S. Furthermore, through the three different venues of stand-up comedy, ritual-performance, and photography, their diversified performances of the Korean diaspora re-territorialize a utopic community of belonging.

In the last chapter, my analysis of the autobiographical theater works engaged with the adoptee artists' own birth search and reunion with their biological families in Korea. I argued that the adoptee artists' performances of their own encounters with Korean culture, their biological family, and their past and present, disclose the complicated scope and meanings of race, gender, class, kinship, citizenship, and belonging for the Korean diaspora both in the U.S. and in Korea. These represented and imagined experiences of adoption stories are not *the* essential representation of Korean adoptees as a whole; however, these theatrical embodiments are significant. The childhood stories unveil how hegemonic racial and class ideology have been inscribed on the bodies of orphans/lost children in Korea and on adoptees' bodies in the U.S. Gender becomes another unexpected force that attempts to reshape an adoptee's identity during her birth search and reunion, illustrating how female adoptees' experiences in Korea differ from those of male adoptees. The embodiments of Korean adoptees' liminal experiences of birth search and reunion in Korea thus expose the complex process of becoming a Korean diaspora as both the U.S. and Korea mark their bodies and language with ethnic, race, gender, and class inscriptions of belonging.

This study of nine Korean diasporic artists first presents an opportunity to generate *new* insight about liminal belonging for the Korean diasporic imagination in terms of spatial and cultural relationships in the family, of the Korean female body in performance, and in the birth search and reunion narratives of Korean transnational adoptees. Second, their works destabilize the limited and limiting view of Korean families as being either Americanized or traditionally Korean, of Korean women being either Western or "Oriental," and Korean adoptees as being in between American and

Korean. Third, these works reveal the complexity of the Korean diaspora's dis/associating and dis/identifying experiences of its U.S. immigration history, the transnational adoption connection between the U.S. and Korea, and the diaspora's cultural significances, challenges, and potentials.

Korean diasporic theater and performance artists have existed in many locations throughout several historical time periods and expressed themselves via many different genres but their works (aside from a few internationally renowned artists like Nam June Paik) were not really taken into account in Korea. It was therefore gratifying for me to witness this previously unseen interest in the performance of the Korean diaspora when the National Theater Company of Korea (NTCK) staged in Seoul five plays by Korean diasporic playwrights in June and July 2017. In a press conference, the artistic director, Kim Yun-cheol, mentioned that NTCK wanted to explore issues of the Korean diaspora and specifically in what ways diasporic Koreans retain, relinquish, or reform their identity. The five plays that were performed included *Song of the Dragons Flying to Heaven* (2006) by Young Jean Lee, *This Isn't Romance* (2009) by British Korean adoptee In-sook Chappell, Mia Chung's *You For Me For You* (2012), Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* (2011), and *Aubergine* by Julia Cho.³⁷⁰ I attended and was thrilled to see two productions, *You For Me For You* and *Kim's Convenience*, directed and performed by Koreans.³⁷¹ The subject matters expressed in the five plays are diverse: racism in the

³⁷⁰ Min-sik Yoon, "Contemporary plays examine Korean diaspora," *Korea Herald*, June 5, 2017, <http://www.koreaherald.com/view.php?ud=20170604000160>.

³⁷¹ The productions revealed two critical issues pertaining to the theater-making process when producing an English speaking play in which a character speaks English with a

U.S., Korean international adoption, immigrant families in Canada and the U.S, and the life of a North Korean defector. This last topic was explored in *You For Me For You*, a play that imagined the liminal experiences of a North Korean female in South Korea and the United States. *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo* (2017), written by Korean diasporic playwright Jiehae Park, is another play that created an imagined North Korea in dealing with diasporic experiences of a Korean American family. This new play depicts a Korean grandmother and her descendants in the U.S. including her granddaughter, Hannah. The premise of the story is the grandmother's supposed suicide by jumping from a senior care facility located adjacent to the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) between South Korea and North Korea. The play follows the Korean American family's trip to Korea to retrieve her body. The play was first staged at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in 2017.³⁷² These two plays indicate a present shift in Korean and Korean diasporic identity.

Throughout all of 2017, the news about Korea indicated escalating tension between North Korea and the U.S. and even the possibility of a nuclear war. In the beginning of 2018, news from the Korean peninsula in U.S. media spoke of a thawing out between South and North Korea just before the 2018 PyoungChang Winter Olympics. The expectation was that North Korea's participation in the Olympic Games would

Korean accent. First, the importance of translating English to Korean for theatrical representations; and second, the skin color for characters of color, particularly in the practice of blackface. The fact that the five plays were all from English speaking countries (the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom) showed the need for a more diverse perspective about the Korean diaspora in the realm of Korean theater.

³⁷² Jiehae Park, *Hannah and the Dread Gazebo* (New York: Samuel French, 2017).

subsequently lead to a military summit and even an inter-Korean summit over the issue of the denuclearization of the Korean peninsula. As a provisional Korean diasporic person who has stayed in the U.S. for almost eight years, I was heartened by the news about the restart of the hotline between South Korea and North Korea, a ray of hope within the gloomy neo-exclusion and warmongering narrative promulgated by the leader of my hostland. When attempting to configure the Korean diaspora in theater, performance, and art in general, the boundaries that demarcate imagination and default to exclusion should always be under scrutiny and under construction in more inclusive and diverse ways. The configuration of the Korean diaspora in art as in life should not be delegated to politicians (and certainly not to non-Korean politicians at that) but should be entrusted to the people of Korea, and principally to all those that have scattered or been forced to scatter all over the world since the colonization of the entire Korean peninsula by Japanese imperial forces at the beginning of the twentieth Century.

This dissertation's investigation of the artistic expression of the construction, diversification, and complication of liminal belonging of the Korean diaspora in the U.S. attempts to cultivate ways of understanding human mobility, transnational flow and identity, and the equal rights of minority, women, children, and forced diaspora embedded within the selected case studies. The discussion of the performances of the Korean diaspora in this study presents an epistemological and ethnographic imagination that embodies the transcultural experience and transpacific identity based on the concept of liminal belonging. There are myriad shades of the Korean diaspora; this research sheds light on a few with the hope that the study of future performances of the Korean diaspora will not be limited by an arbitrary line in the ground. As shifts in geopolitical power

impact the Korean Peninsula and its neighboring nations, the future performances of the Korean diaspora will undoubtedly reflect the changes that will come about. One can only wish that a reunification of the two Koreas will bring forth new performances of the Korean diaspora not only from the South and the North but from the many different countries where Koreans have dispersed to for more than a century. With an estimated seven million Koreans living abroad, the equivalent of ten percent of the total Korean peninsula population, Korea's experiences of mass migration have not yet been fully brought to light.³⁷³ In a new era of hopefully longstanding reconciliation, I wholeheartedly believe that sharing memories and experiences of home, community, journeys, and new hostlands through theater and performance can generate a critical and creative dialogue on the liminal belonging of the Korean diaspora.

³⁷³ Kim, *Transnational Migration, Media and Identity of Asian Women*, 21.

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