

## ABSTRACT

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AN ARCHIVE OF KOREAN/AMERICAN  
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This dissertation formulates an approach to reading Korean/American narratives through what I call a “megatext” in order to understand the uneven and dynamic production of Korean/Americanness. By advancing a “megatextual” approach to conceiving of identity and politics, I argue for a way of addressing the critical gap Asian Americanist practitioners continue to witness between activist demands for social justice and scholarly articulations of those demands. A megatextual approach seeks to be an alternative reading practice that bridges different realms of knowledge production.

Megatexts argue for a practice of reading across an archive in which texts are actively cross-referencing each other. This approach is essential to the way we apprehend knowledge in the current economy. I define the overarching term “megatext” as a rewritable archive of information and meaning within which the processes of archiving and interpretation are taking place at the same time. I identify

particular theoretical concepts leading into my formulation of megatexts and argue the political significance of this approach in terms of Asian American studies and public intellectualism. Then, I define and apply the term “Korean/American” in order to refer to the broad body of work constituting here a “Korean/American megatext.” The convergences among the various discourses referenced by megatexts demonstrate how they are useful for bridging different realms. Lastly, I identify the significant constructions of “Korea” in the media as impacting Korean/American ethnic identity formations in order to establish my focus on contemporary Korean/Americanness.

I apply this focus and formulate megatexts for each chapter based on individual Korean/American authors and the texts and discourses they reference. Chapter one examines a megatext of Chang-rae Lee’s novels, authorship, and popularity. Chapter two expands on the concept of authorship and discusses Don Lee and his collection, *Yellow*, as evidence of the commodification of author and text. Chapter three examines Korean/American women’s bodies in Nora Okja Keller’s novels as emblematic of the gendered, neocolonial U.S.-Korea relationship. This dissertation emphasizes the importance of reading the dynamic elements of narratives as a way of contending with the shifting and relational nature of the meanings that accrue to Korean/Americanness.

MEGATEXTUAL READINGS: ACCESSING AN ARCHIVE OF  
KOREAN/AMERICAN CONSTRUCTIONS

By

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## Introduction: Formulating Megatexts

Ethnic studies scholar Elaine Kim occasionally includes in her work a personal narrative of her Korean/American identity vis-à-vis the particular project.<sup>1</sup> For example, frustrated by criticisms on one hand from other scholars telling her to stick to Korean/American cultural study and accusations on the other of “narrow nationalism” in working towards a Korean nationalist project, Kim candidly shares the following:

I became sensitive to the fact that the Asian American movement was so Japanese- and Chinese-dominated.... I'm not sure what to do. Because in a way everything I ever had, everything that's ever happened to me, whether it's bad or good, has had something to do with being Korean American. I can't get away from that. I don't want to get away from that. Still, I don't want to be tokenized (Interview 240).

These personal sentiments were printed in a 2004 double-issue volume of *Amerasia Journal* titled “What Does it Mean to be Korean American Today?” As a focused inquiry into Korean/Americanness, both the *Amerasia* volume and my project would not be complete without discussion by or about one of Asian American studies' most important Korean/American pioneer scholars, Elaine Kim.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kim's partial CV here: <http://ethnicstudies.berkeley.edu/faculty/kim/>. In particular, for Kim's personal analyses of her Korean/American self-identity, see Appendix A of *East to America*, the foreword in Lim and Ling (the discussion of how she came to read Theresa Hakyung Cha's *Dictée*), and the mentor piece in Nam.



Kim's comments imply that everything she's ever done has also had something to do with being Korean/American. In terms of the scholarly discourse and related projects in which Kim has engaged, we can surmise both that her identity has caused her to participate in those particular projects and that the people leading them have sought her expertise as an effect of her identity. In other words, ethnic specificity continues to be important in Asian American studies. Kim, for instance, has worked on numerous "high profile" Korean/American projects.<sup>2</sup>

Kim's personal narrative, then, can be read intertextually with the narratives of the various Korean/American projects to which she contributes. Given that her personal narrative is continually being written anew and that she continues to take on new projects, this method of reading must be considered as dynamic. Over time, as narratives become archived in ethnic studies discourse, several processes are set into motion: the interpretation of those narratives resulting in knowledge production; the introduction of new texts; followed by interpretation of new texts together with prior texts; and so on. All of these processes together rewrite the archive in composition and meaning.

For example, while serving as Chair of Comparative Ethnic Studies at University of California Berkeley, Kim published an analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riots in the form of an op-ed piece submitted to *Newsweek's* "My Turn" section (18 May 1992). Kim's viewpoint in the essay was personal and articulated

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<sup>2</sup> Such projects of Kim's include: the documentary film *Sa-i-gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives* co-produced with Christine Choy and Dai-sil Kim-Gibson (1993); the collection of emerging Korean/American writers published by the Asian American Writer's Workshop, *Echoes Upon Echoes: New Korean American Writings* (2003) co-edited with Laura Hyun Yi Kang; and the collection of interviews with Korean/American Los Angelenos, *East to America: Korean American Life Writings* (1996) co-edited with Eui-Young Yu.

from her position as a Korean/American scholar and citizen. On impulse and based on her own convictions, she felt compelled to combat the ways in which the media decontextualized and silenced the Korean/American role in the race riots. The essay accused the news media of pitting Korean/Americans and African Americans against one another for the sake of diverting attention from the deep, institutionally and governmentally enforced roots of racial violence. Kim's goal was to contextualize the situation in Los Angeles in terms of racialized histories and contemporary politics.

In essence, the *Newsweek* essay was an attempt to translate the theory and genealogy of ethnic studies into language useful for mainstream readers so that they might better understand and cope with the then current tragic situation.

Unfortunately, though, the essay was met largely with hate mail. Kim heard from some sympathizers: "Many [letters] came from Korean Americans who were glad that one of their number had found a vehicle for self-expression," but the more compelling responses in support of her essay came from African Americans. ("*Han*" 227). Still, letters sent to the editor of *Newsweek* and Kim directly consisted of scathing responses that left Kim "shocked by the profound ignorance" (223) of the readers' views.

The fact that Kim's *Newsweek* essay failed to garner more positive response highlights the fact that a critical gap exists between scholarly work and realms outside of academia. Not only did the style of the essay conflict with the editor's "experienced journalist" approach (222), but also the viewpoints expressed in the piece angered most of *Newsweek's* target audience. On the effects of the hate mail,

Kim expressed, “I never thought that readers would write over my words with their own” (226). Here the author’s admission directs us to pay critical attention to the power of overwrite/rewrite technology, as this technology was operational in the readers’ letters.

As a result of the *Newsweek* experience, Kim published a follow-up essay titled “Home is Where the *Han* Is: A Korean American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals.”<sup>3</sup> Writing again from a personal perspective yet in a distinctly scholarly essay, Kim reflects in hindsight that she should not have been surprised by the Los Angeles uprisings or by the ignorance and hatred expressed in the letters (227).

“Home is Where the *Han* Is” simultaneously articulates a new narrative, the critical reflection on the *Newsweek* experience, and rewrites a prior one, the original *Newsweek* essay. As such, it exemplifies my critical sense that Korean/American narratives are dynamic discursive objects and that Korean/Americanness is a shifting cultural, political, and social construction. Elaine Kim’s work thus serves as an ideal point of departure for this project’s interest in the ways in which those shifts may be apprehended and studied. My dissertation formulates an approach to reading Korean/American narratives through what I call a “megatext” in order to understand the uneven and dynamic production of Korean/Americanness. As the Kim *Newsweek* example indicates, critics must find ways to grapple with the distance between academic and mainstream readerships.

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<sup>3</sup> This essay was published in *Reading Rodney King Reading Urban Uprising* (Routledge, 1993), edited by Robert Gooding-Williams. This collection contains numerous essays by noteworthy scholars.

This dissertation's megatextual approach responds to this need, which is part of a broader issue articulated by George Lipsitz for ethnic studies and ethnic communities:

The contrast between the successes of ethnic studies and the crises facing ethnic communities is especially galling because academic ethnic studies emerged as a field precisely because of movements for social justice during the 1960s and 1970s. The institutional spaces we occupy exist because community activists and organizations won them through sustained collective struggle. Yet despite our best efforts the communities whose aspirations and grievances created us are faring badly. (296)

The disappointment in ethnic studies' failure to achieve its established goals, expressed by Lipsitz above, stems from the continuing significance of a critical gap between the academic institution and "the community." The gap between these two realms is sometimes referred to by a dialectic of "theory and practice" or the divide of "town and gown." My dissertation offers a way of bridging this critical gap in order for intellectual activist movements for social justice to have a more significant impact on society.

A current mode of bridging is through public scholarship, which has been articulated in the discourse of the ethnic public intellectual. In the context of Asian American studies, Lisa Lowe, Frank Wu, and Elaine Kim, for example, have functioned contemporarily as public intellectuals by publishing numerous articles and texts that advocate for Asian American communities. However, the role of the public

intellectual remains contested in terms of what constitutes the work of a public intellectual and who qualifies as one. As a result, public scholarship falls short of serving as a clear and stable method for practitioners to use in working to address structural inequities. Furthermore, the discourse of the public intellectual does not account for the multiple forms of work being done simultaneously in what I see to be the distinct realms of art, scholarship, and community activism. In this dissertation, I argue for an alternative approach to bridging these gaps. I do so by advancing what I call a “megatextual” approach to conceiving of identity and politics, as a way of addressing the discord Lipsitz and others continue to witness between Asian American activist demands for social justice and Asian American studies’ articulation of those demands.

I aim to address these changes through an incorporation of texts that circulate more widely than scholarly writings but that also produce meaning. This method seeks to urge practitioners to read non-academic texts that they would not normally read as well as to consider the meanings that those texts produce. The concept of different kinds of texts referencing and speaking to each other, such as literary, media, scholarly, and digital texts, thus rendering culture meaningful has become especially relevant with Internet technology.

For instance, Google is the unofficial leader for information searches on the World Wide Web. If one Googles the novel *Fox Girl* by Nora Okja Keller, using “keller fox girl” as search words, one will find that the top ten results produce a number of publishing related sites, mainly containing reviews and e-commerce ways to buy the book. But, within the top 20 results, one will also find reading guides,

interviews with the author, and discussion boards. Moreover, one will find that some of those sites and viewpoints are based outside of the U.S.

The way Google works is that it produces results for the most popular sites, that is, the sites that are being accessed the most by users. Amazon.com is almost always at the top for literary texts. If one did a Google search for Chang-rae Lee and his novel *Native Speaker*, which was published earlier than Keller's, scholarly journal articles in, for example, *MELUS Journal* and ProjectMUSE will appear. But these sites are a bit far down in the list of results, and depending on the link, one may not be able to access the full article because scholarly databases are usually limited to paying subscribers. Generally, only institutions can afford the subscription fees.

As a megatextual approach argues, reading across an archive in which texts are actively cross-referencing each other (similar to how the Web and hypertexts work) is essential to the way we apprehend knowledge in the current economy. In this project, I seek to grapple with the tensions between academic and mainstream methods and the production of meaning in those different realms. I do so by defining the overarching term "megatext" as a rewritable archive of information and meaning within which the processes of archiving and interpretation are taking place at the same time. I identify particular theoretical concepts leading into my formulation of megatexts and argue the political significance of this approach in terms of Asian American studies and public intellectualism. Then, I define and apply the term "Korean/American" in order to refer to the broad body of work constituting a "Korean/American megatext" for this dissertation. The convergences among the various discourses referenced by megatexts demonstrate how they are useful for

bridging different realms. Lastly, I identify the increased significance of constructions of “Korea” in contemporary U.S. media as impacting Korean/American ethnic identity formations in order to establish my dissertation’s focus on contemporary Korean/Americanness. I apply this focus and formulate megatexts for each chapter based on individual Korean/American authors and the texts and discourses they reference.

I define a megatext generally as a rewritable archive of information and meaning within which the processes of archiving and interpretation are taking place at the same time. What makes this archive of texts a “megatext” is that it includes the sources, codes, and signifying practices of prior discourses (histories, narratives, methods, etc.). In addition, the archive provides space for the shifting nature of texts and the inclusion of newly produced texts. This space for memory in a megatext is accessed randomly, similar to the way in which digital memory storage works.<sup>4</sup> Functioning like files in a directory, texts are overwritten by the constant activity of interpretation that occurs when the texts/files are read. By addressing ourselves to such a discursive object, we commit ourselves to a megatextual reading, which serves as a useful tool for apprehending a rich cross-section of information.

In this project, I identify contemporary works of literary fiction as key texts of a megatext. In addition to reading these works in relation to scholarly and mainstream writings about them and their authors, I also read the academic discourses and social, political, and historical conditions informing both work and author. The

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<sup>4</sup> In this definitional analogy, I am mainly referring to hard disk drives (built into a computer’s hardware or portable for use on any computer) that save data using the computer processor’s random access memory (RAM). Rewritable CDs, in contrast, though also widely used forms of digital storage, save data in a fixed, linear order using the CD-RW drive.

timeliness of these texts and discourses is specific to this project's sense of an active archive because of my concern with the speed and extent of technology in the current economy. To address this concern, I espouse what Katie King has called "flexible knowledges" towards conceptualizing megatexts differently for this dissertation's chapters. For each chapter, I create a dynamic archive that reaches out to and into multiple spheres of discourse. I recognize that the discourses and, therefore, the shape of each chapter's megatext will continue to shift because of what each literary text and author may be cross-referencing in the current historical moment. Nonetheless, throughout the chapters, I aim to apply an approach to reading texts that are immediately accessible and in relation to a work of literary fiction, however varied those texts may be.

As a way of establishing a framework for this reading practice, I draw from Julia Kristeva's theory of intertextuality and Michel Foucault's theory of the author-function to conceptualize megatexts. To the megatexts I formulate, I apply a method of intertextual reading that I have adapted from my early, beginner study of African American literature. Reading black fiction first taught me to think about race as a construction. The intertextuality of African American narratives established for me the "speakerly text" as a feature of narrative that informs my approach to megatexts. In doing so, I emphasize the importance of reading the dynamic elements of narratives as a way of contending with the shifting and relational nature of the meanings that accrue to Korean/Americanness.

Though I recognize that this approach for reading literary texts may seem discipline-specific vis-à-vis the interdisciplinary goals of Asian American studies, it



is my study of literature that prompted me to read critically texts and discourses from multiple disciplines and then to conceive of this megatextual approach for stretching the boundaries of literary study. As an instructor of literature, I still view the material act of reading on a very fundamental level. Reading is a practice grounded in our society—through institutional education and libraries, individual and community recreation, and private commerce and industry. And I see reading as an ideal channel for bridging the differential objectives of scholarship and activism precisely because the practice of reading both intersects and impacts those realms.

This project formulates an exemplary and overarching Korean/American megatext as a way of investigating how meaningful knowledge about and critical understandings of Asian Americanness are produced relationally. Contemporarily, there has been increased attention in the U.S. national imagination to “Korea,” which here refers both to the geopolitical entity of South Korea and the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea.” I will discuss specific examples of how “Korea” has emerged more frequently and significantly in culture towards the end of this Introduction. These operations for “Korea” in culture impact social constructions of Korean/Americanness.<sup>5</sup> However, this project’s ethnic-specific focus offers but one way of formulating megatexts. My goal is that this project will prove useful for other kinds of critical investigations in a variety of disciplines, whether continuing with Korean/Americanness or extending to other kinds of megatexts.

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<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler uses the term “phantasmatic” to discuss the U.S. contemporary theatre of war, in particular, the U.S. military’s use of the smart bomb in Operation Desert Storm. The smart bomb films its target as it moves in to destroy it. Butler writes, the “visual record of this war is not a *reflection* on the war, but the enactment of its phantasmatic structure, indeed, part of the very means by which it is socially constituted and maintained as war” (11). I am using phantasmatic here to refer to the socially constructed associations with “Korea”—e.g. narratives of personal or national histories and experiences; representations of culture, ethnicity, nationalism(s); minority politics, gender politics, and race relations in the U.S.—as a way of naming a discourse that is inherently elusive.

The Korean/American authors whose works of literary fiction anchor my discussions include Chang-rae Lee, Don Lee, and Nora Okja Keller. The basic megatextual approach to all three authors is to read the intertextuality of their works of fiction with accessible constructions of identity and politics to show how meaning is produced about Korean/Americanness in national culture. For instance, the chapters' megatexts reveal that underlying discourses of, for example, the "model minority," colonialism, and blackness inform the construction of Korean/Americanness. A megatext allows the intertextuality of, for instance, a Korean/American novel and an African American novel to register. Such critical attention may enable us to see how ethnic literary histories and discourses of gendered, ethnic narrative tropes actively cross-reference each other in the production of knowledge. I will provide detailed chapter descriptions with specific mention of author and text selections towards the end of this Introduction. But before I can justify those selections, I must provide a discussion of the political contexts in which megatexts aim to intervene.

### **Political Significance of a Megatextual Reading Practice**

In addition to Lipsitz's provocative assessment, to which this project aims to respond, the call for scholars to pay critical attention to people's lived experiences and engage with community activism comes in many forms. In the archive of Asian American studies, from *Aiiiiieee!* to *YELL-Oh Girls!*, battle cries of literary voices uniting against "[s]even generations of suppression under legislative racism and

euphemized white racist love” (Chan, 1974 vii) continue to be uttered.<sup>6</sup> Yet, as an advocate for the critical articulation of the complex needs of communities and conditions for change, Asian American studies has performed inadequately or inefficiently in part due to its struggles with institutionalization. The institutionalization of ethnic studies and implementation of diversity programs at U.S. universities aimed to address the unequal distribution of resources and disparate access to higher education. However, such changes have unfolded within the parameters of neoliberalism under the guise of “multiculturalism.” Lisa Duggan summarizes neoliberalism’s operation in society:

Neoliberalism, a late twentieth-century incarnation of Liberalism, organizes material and political life *in terms of* race, gender, and sexuality as well as economic class and nationality or ethnicity and religion. But the categories through which Liberalism (and thus also neoliberalism) classifies activity and relationships actively obscure the connections among these organizing terms (3).

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<sup>6</sup> I refer to the anthologies of Asian American literature edited by Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, *Aiiieeee!* (1974) and *The Big Aiiieeee!* (1991), and the collection of essays written by Asian American girls, *YELL-Oh Girls!* (2001) edited by Vickie Nam. The editors write, “Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed “Aiiieeee!” Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice” (Chan et al., 1991 xi). Nam explains, “It is the radical act of reclaiming and redefining the word *yellow* that thrills me. In the context of our anthology, ‘yellow’ takes on new meaning... ‘Yellow’ has been used to define skin color...and carries with it other racist assumptions. On our terms, however, the hyphenated “yell-oh” does not define or create barriers between Asian Americans. Simply put, the term ‘YELL-Oh’ is a call to action” (xxviii). And finally, Nam claims, “Our collective mission is to increase cultural awareness, to teach each other the importance of self-love, and to promote self-expression... My dream is that these writings will inspire girls everywhere to speak out or—if they want—to *YELL like hell!*” (xxx).

The impact of neoliberalism has provoked oppositional strategies and coalitional resistance from the progressive-left to combat systematic inequalities. One such strategy is the critique of the “model minority” construction for the ways in which it fleeces Asian American and other minority group particularities and thereby serves “multicultural” agendas. It follows, then, that in order to reinsert the particular subjectivities and complex histories of, for instance, Asian Americans, into political life, we must shift and/or expand our scholarly work to attend critically to more publicly accessible texts and to be better conversant with broader, public discourses. This is the basic goal of a megatextual approach to understanding knowledge production.

Institutionalization has arguably had depoliticizing effects on our critical understandings of Korean/Americanness. It separates the cultural signification of Korean/Americanness from the global and domestic structural systems that exert power relationally over economics, politics, and social life. To challenge those effects, I read the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea” and Korean/Americanness in existing public discourses and spaces. Similar to the ways that Avery Gordon investigates “haunting and phantoms,” which she argues lay bare “the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time” (6), I show how a phantasmatic “Korea” functions as a social figure in contemporary U.S. life and in our understandings of U.S. and Korean history. By reading the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea” in a megatext, I show how narratives in multiple realms and discourses—coded as public or private and circulating in various registers—all participate, though variously,

unevenly, and fluidly, to construct our understandings of Korean/Americanness. I promote the theoretical methods of intertextuality to demonstrate how the consideration of formally non-identical texts allows us to recognize how different kinds of texts may be juxtaposed and thus harnessed together to advance social critique.

### **Formulation of a Korean/American Megatext**

My use of the term “Korean/American” with the “intervening slash”<sup>7</sup> and its function as a modifier for the term “megatext” bears some explanation. Building upon the arguments of Laura Hyun Yi Kang and David Palumbo-Liu, my use of the signifier “Korean/American” points to the mutually informing nature of the terms on either side of the slash as constructs of nationhood, culture, personhood, and/or identity. That which is constituted as “Korean” should be fully thought through with an understanding of that which is defined to be “American” and vice versa. As scholars such as Chungmoo Choi and Bruce Cumings have discussed, “America” as a hegemonic presence has been in Korea and informed a construction of Korean/Americanness since at least the mid-20th century. Through the installation of U.S. military forces, the influence of U.S.-based corporate power, and the prominence of English-language education, Korea has come to be known as a

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<sup>7</sup> I borrow the “intervening slash” from Laura Hyun Yi Kang, which has also been referred to as the “solidus” by David Palumbo-Liu. In *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999), Palumbo-Liu discusses the Asian/American “split” and designates the “solidus” to “signal those instances in which a liaison between ‘Asian’ and ‘American,’ a *sliding over* between two seemingly separate terms, is constituted...” He writes, “‘Asian/American’ marks *both* the distinction installed between ‘Asian’ and ‘American’ *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement” (1). Kang employs the slash to serve as a “diacritically awkward shorthand for the cultural, economic, and geopolitical pressures” between and coming to bear upon Korean and Korean/American constructions such as subjects, objects of study, experiences, and identities (CS 2).

neocolony of the U.S. That relationship continues to effect the construction of Korean/American ethnic identity in the U.S.

In my formulation of megatexts, I identify the recurrence of epistemes through which a particular, patterned construction of Korean/Americanness emerges. Those epistemes regulate the representation of bodies, some signified as Korean/American bodies, and some as the Korean national body or the Korean peninsula. Throughout the modern history of U.S.-Korea relations, cultural intelligibility has been a much sought after commodity by those involved in or affected by the multi-dimensional exchange between the two countries. Especially in the current moment's political and military climate, conceiving of and interpreting "Korea" through a megatext can make a critical contribution towards better apprehending the high stakes nature of U.S.-Korea relations because this approach prompts us to consider converging discourses. The concept of a Korean/American megatext seeks to introduce new texts, read together with prior texts and discourses, in an effort to make contributions to Korean studies,<sup>8</sup> towards the improvement of U.S.-Korea relations, and towards enabling Korean/American community empowerment. As a mode for extending intertextual reading practices to more kinds of social and other texts, the idea of a Korean/American megatext has the potential to help bridge critical gaps that may exist between other realms.

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<sup>8</sup> University of Washington's Korean Studies program, for example, had been struggling since 2001 with the retirement of its most senior faculty member. However, in 2005, the program secured \$1.3 million in grants from the Korean government and an additional \$500,000 from the state of Washington to create an endowed chair to lead the program going forward.

Intertextuality, the theoretical concept established by the work of Julia Kristeva and Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and heteroglossia,<sup>9</sup> informs my formulation of megatexts and the reading practices they advance. The theory of intertextuality draws on the complexities of one's presuppositions and the intertextual nature of formal utterance. According to Bakhtin, an utterance is any thought that is given voice in speech or in writing, and its intertextual nature is not deliberate but embedded. Kristeva uses heteroglossia, which emphasizes a multiplicity of social voices within the text, to define intertextuality as an infrastructure of texts according to which language is stratified and diversified.<sup>10</sup>

Intertextuality, then, is what marks the discursive space in culture that renders texts intelligible to each other. This discursive space, Jonathan Culler explains, consists of "other projects and thoughts which [a text] implicitly or explicitly takes up, prolongs, cites, refutes, transforms" (101). My naming of a Korean/American megatext is a way of making visible the range of "other projects," along with literary works, that simultaneously construct Korean/Americanness. I advance through this idea of a Korean/American megatext the importance of recognizing that texts "about" Korean/Americanness rely upon ongoing and multiply located discourses, which must

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<sup>9</sup> Bakhtin's concept of dialogue, or the dialogic, posits a speaker, a listener/respondent, and a relation between the two, which is in opposition to monologue, or the monologic, which are utterances (speech or thoughts) from a single person or unified source. Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia examines the stylistics of the novel through language and ideas, the multiplicity and interrelationships of which reflect and situate the text in the social world (263). See "Discourse in the Novel" in Holquist (1981).

<sup>10</sup> According to Kristeva, the three dimensions of textual space are writing subject, addressee, and exterior texts, and they can be spatialized along horizontal and vertical axes. She writes, "The word's status is thus defined horizontally (the word in the text belongs to both writing subject and addressee) as well as vertically (the word in the text is oriented towards an anterior or synchronic literary corpus). . . each word (text) is an intersection of words (texts) where at least one other word (text) can be read . . . any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (37). See "Word, Dialogue and Novel" in Moi (1986).

therefore be read as constantly and mutually (in)forming each other. Culler explains the importance of the relational nature of cultural and discursive spaces:

Yet in so far as it focuses on intelligibility, on meaning, “intertextuality” leads us to consider prior texts as contributions to a code which makes possible the various effects of signification. Intertextuality thus becomes less a name for a work’s relation to particular prior texts than a designation of its participation in the discursive space of a culture: the relationship between a text and the various languages or signifying practices of a culture and its relation to those texts which articulate for it the possibilities of that culture (103).

This way of understanding intertextuality and its emphasis on the relational nature of texts, meanings, and culture seems an apt way of thinking about how to recoordinate scholarship and activism in Asian American studies. While we can certainly track through time the narrative of Asian American studies’ material and intellectual development as a field, the spatial considerations of its signifying practices and critical languages through various discursive spaces seems equally if not more relevant to document. For instance, in response to recent crises over the dying role of the U.S. university as “producer, protector, and inculcator of an idea of national culture” (3), Bill Readings claims that referents for “culture” have no relevancy:

...“culture”—as the symbolic and political counterpart to the project of integration pursued by the nation-state—has lost its purchase. The nation-state and the modern notion of culture arose together, and they



are, I argue, ceasing to be essential to an increasingly transnational global economy. This shift has major implications for the University, which has historically been the primary institution of national culture in the modern nation-state. (12)

Readings attributes the diminished critical importance of culture to the contemporary rise of transnationalism and the ways in which the role of the university has shifted over time. In order to shift our thinking on “culture” to spatial terms, we might instead think of culture as phantasmatic, always already formed by and informing systems of power. This move can enable us to think more fully about Korean/Americanness as a possible referent for culture.

The approach to a Korean/American megatext as a rewritable archive of relational meanings, of intersecting languages and signifiers across multiple discursive realms, offers a conceptual way of coordinating relationships among texts, discourses, and the languages and practices of culture. The postulation of a Korean/American megatext makes possible a particular mode of intertextual reading that accounts for texts that are multiply participating in the discourses of Asian American studies, literary fiction, and popular media—all of which, I argue, contribute to the ways in which Korean/Americanness is imagined.

### **A Megatext as a Bridge for Asian American Studies**

In drawing from the methods of literary study and tools of literary criticism to examine various kinds of texts, I focus on Asian American literature as an exemplary subfield of Asian American studies. Building on the work done by Asian American

literary scholars and fiction writers, I argue that literature representing Korean/American characters, experiences, histories, and cultures contributes to a scripting or patterning of Korean/Americanness that has an impact beyond the realm of literary study. This pattern begins to take shape through literary analysis of a text and becomes more firmly etched through that work's dynamic interaction with both public and private discourses. The idea of a megatext provides a discursive bridge between what we analyze about Korean/Americanness in Asian American literary studies, which I understand to be a kind of privatized knowledge circulating institutionally and accessed mainly by literary scholars, with what is said "about" "Korea" and Korean/Americanness in public discourse, which I see to be mainstream media distributed and accessed publicly. As such, the exchange of knowledge across and between realms may be made more active.

While a rigid dichotomy of public and private is still applied in conventional economics, other more fluid conceptualizations of public and private spheres have been advanced by research in ethics and technology and changes in law practices. Also, theoretical arguments in political liberalism, postmodernism, and feminism have generally pushed for a productive destabilization of any absolute boundaries between the public and the private. Feminist theory, for instance, has consistently argued the

need to deconstruct the hierarchical binary of an orthodox separate spheres model and to replace it with one that acknowledges that public and private are not stable, unchangeable, or natural polarities.

Acknowledging the social pliability of separate spheres demands that

we stay alert to how the distinction between public and private has been maintained through legal, cultural, and economic discourses. But it also obliges us to investigate the modes by which various public interests have tacitly or explicitly challenged these discourses, either by constructing alternative publics or by imagining different ways of circulating and distributing power between public and private. (Park and Wald 612)

My project's megatextual approach joins in the efforts to consider different ways of identifying what constitutes public and private as well as who is accessing and working within those spheres of knowledge and culture. These challenges issue a call to renegotiate the boundaries between public and private spheres and to consider how these spheres, similar to a megatext, have rewritable features. If we consider public and private to have a dialectical rather than dichotomous relationship, then we can conceive of public and private as simultaneously constructing each other.

Understanding the simultaneity of public and private spheres active in a megatext can serve Asian American studies by providing the field with a more effective mode for engaging with the tensions that characterize the relationship between the academy and the community. The institutionalization of Asian American studies is itself a significant accomplishment at many universities and colleges. But, the material and intellectual constraints stemming from its lingering marginalized status within the academy continue to afflict the relationship between Asian American studies and the university. In part as a result of global capitalism and neoliberalism, or what Bill Readings refers to as the "rule of the cash-nexus in place

of the notion of national identity as determinant of all aspects of investment in social life” (3), the modern University functions more like a transnational corporation than an institution of national culture. The university as an institution today operates under a market-driven mission of “excellence,” which arguably has no ideological referent.<sup>11</sup>

The institutionalization of Asian American studies has no doubt been impacted by these shifts. Lisa Lowe argues that the institutionalization of ethnic studies is inherently contradictory through a consideration of the contemporary university as an “ideological state apparatus,” which enables the “neoconservative management of the function of university education” (39). The rise of ethnic and cultural studies forces practitioners to grapple constantly with this paradox: ethnic studies enables scholars to pursue “transformative critique” at the same time that it “submits in part to the demands of the university” (41). Asian American studies, for instance, continues to employ interdisciplinary methods as a way of providing resistance and vigilance against institutional pressures to follow Western/universal methodologies (40).

Stemming from that paradox and in part due to its interdisciplinary nature, Asian American studies departments or programs are often forced to function as general, one-stop-shopping courses of academic study. This misapplication occurs on many levels, for example: 1) the university’s fiscal approach to ethnic studies’ demands that responds with short-term solutions;<sup>12</sup> 2) general education approaches

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<sup>11</sup> See Bill Readings’ *The University in Ruins*, the Introduction chapter and Chapter 2, for more discussion of the idea of excellence.

<sup>12</sup> My home institution, University of Maryland, has implemented Asian American studies through a bottom-up approach, that is, in short-term response to student activism. For example, in spring 2004,

to program and degree requirements that emphasize coverage and “diversity”; and 3) practitioner or student-dedicated approaches that stretch resources beyond their useful reach.<sup>13</sup> These kinds of limited or limiting approaches to Asian American studies academic units, especially fledgling ones, leave unwanted room for institutional neglect of the methodological and professional specificities of the field.

In response to these gaps, Asian Americanist practitioners have responded with concerted efforts to situate themselves within existing networks of power “to examine more fully the extent to which a dominant national culture... and academic and institutional pressures overdetermine the responsibilities of representation to which ethnic studies is obligated” (Parikh 250). In this way of advancing self-reflexivity, the discourse on the ethnic public intellectual has functioned in part as a method for bridging academic and activist projects. Crystal Parikh asserts that a “self-reflexive mode of accountability” enables critical responses to the “prevalent charges that institutionalization and professionalization have superseded ethnic studies’ prior and primary activist, practical, and ‘real’ impulses and agendas” (250). I argue that a megatextual understanding of knowledge production offers a mode for accountability because it compels scholars to anchor their intellectual work to agendas in or extended to the public sphere.

These challenges to the university as an institution and their launchings specifically in the field of Asian American studies have been documented and

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led by members of the Asian American Student Union WAASP committee (Working for an Asian American Studies Program), students petitioned the Provost’s Office with “Valentines,” which were letters expressing the need and demand for a South Asian American studies course. The course was offered in spring 2005, but only approved as a one-time, special topics offering, and taught by a History department graduate student on an adjunct basis.

<sup>13</sup> Examples might include a department’s relying on adjunct instructors and affiliate faculty to maintain depth of course offerings, a faculty member’s agreeing to take on overload courses or duties, part-time student workers and staff members taking on duties outside of their job descriptions.

contextualized by many concerned practitioners, including the editors and contributors in *Amerasia Journal*'s "Thinking Theory in Asian American Studies" (1995, Vol. 21, Nos. 1 & 2), with particular arguments on the effected distances between college campuses and the communities where they are located. I look to this 25<sup>th</sup>-anniversary commemorative double-issue of *Amerasia* because I see it as an influential, material artifact of the field's intellectual history. For one, *Amerasia* is the oldest scholarly journal in Asian American studies published by UCLA, the first university to establish an Asian American studies research center.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, this particular volume, a sizable edited collection, is a textual crystallization of the field's initiative for self-reflexive work.

Though still working through institutional and community struggles, Asian American studies is a field now with its own historical specificities. Spanning three decades, early scholarship in the field formed responses to the inequities of racialized power systems defining oppressive situations for Asian immigrants and their progeny. Students, scholars, and community activists banded together under an umbrella of identity politics to defend Asian American civil rights. Led by a singular cultural nationalism, Asian American studies advanced a "critique of Asian American 'dual identity' ...with the contravening idea that it is the concept of 'America' that needs to be changed so that it is understood that Asian Americans are singularly American" (Sumida).<sup>15</sup> Over time and without specific intention, literary studies produced most

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<sup>14</sup> The second major journal is the *Journal of Asian American Studies (JAAS)*, the scholarly publication of the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS). See also footnote 20.

<sup>15</sup> This era led by Asian American cultural nationalism is well marked by its book-length legacies, *Aiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (1974) and its sequel *The Big Aiiiiiiii!* (1983), both edited by Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong; Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: A Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1979); and Elaine Kim's *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982). The

of these critiques, resulting in an unofficial disciplining of the field.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, Asian American cultural nationalism's earlier, nativist agenda of "anti-Orientalism, valorization of working-class ethnic enclaves, [and] 'claiming America'" lost some efficacy in the face of changing demographics as well as in the midst of new theoretical scholarship, thus "disrupting the apparently consensual theoretical basis of the Asian American Movement" (Wong, "DR" 3, 5). In spite of the necessary arguments for (still) claiming Americanness to combat the perpetual foreigner syndrome that shapes U.S. cultural beliefs as well as *de jure* injustices,<sup>17</sup> the "studied avoidance of Asian connections by cultural critics" came to be seen as inadequate because of the ways in which the cultural landscape had markedly changed (Wong, "Stakes" 135). As Elaine Kim and others have observed and proved, "The lines between Asian and Asian American, so important to identity formation in earlier times, are increasingly being blurred" (Kim, "Preface" xiii).

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responses to these texts as well as the ideological tensions between cultural nationalism and feminism that ensued contributed to the literature-as-theory predominance of the subsequent era. The Chin-Kingston paper war prompted writings such as King-kok Cheung's "The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose between Feminism and Heroism?" (1990), Elaine Kim's "'Such Opposite Creatures': Men and Women in Asian American Literature" (1990), and Emma Teng's "The Battle of the Sexes in Asian American Literature" *Explanasian* 3:3 (1995): 14-15. See also Stephen H. Sumida's "The More Things Change: Paradigm Shifts in Asian American Studies" (2000): 97-115 and King-kok Cheung's "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies," the introductory essay in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (1997), for additional comprehensive discussion of the field.

<sup>16</sup> The guest editors of *Amerasia*'s "Thinking Theory" state: "In contrast to an earlier period, it is the humanities, especially literature and comparative literature, and not the social sciences, that mostly define the range and tone of theoretical discussions—on narratives, subjects, and history in and outside of Asian American Studies" (Omi and Takagi xiv).

<sup>17</sup> The legacy of Japanese American internment is perhaps an indelible reminder of the injustices of the "perpetual foreigner syndrome" inscribed upon Asian Americans. The recurrences of such injustices in U.S. government and military controversies are readily found in the cases of Wen Ho Lee and Bruce Yamashita. See <http://www.wenholee.org> for Wen Ho Lee "look-alike cases," i.e. cases where Asian scientific researchers were accused of commercial espionage and jailed and denied bail due to a cited flight risk. See also <http://www.unlikelyhero.org/story.html> for Yamashita's personal triumph over and investigation into racial discrimination in the U.S. Marines Corps. These claims are not to be confused with the case of Robert Kim, who admitted his guilt, but perhaps a comparison (as Jonathan Pollard, the Jewish American sentenced to life in prison for espionage with Israel has done—see <http://www.jonathanpollard.org>) would be worth investigating.

In an effort to respond to these shifts, critics like Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa call for “eccentricity” in scholarship, so that “presumed objects of knowledge are revisited and recast, such that the disciplines creating and undergirding those objects shudder by being exposed as unstable” (10). Thus in the contemporary moment, Asian American studies continues to struggle with modes of inquiry and to challenge epistemological paradigms. A significant step required for going beyond existing boundaries is “a recognition of transnational realities,” which “means acknowledging that certain groups classified as Asian Americans by post-1960s practice—Americans of Asian nativity—have concerns not addressed by that categorization” (Wong, “DR”10). These kinds of recognitions and acknowledgements are still being asked after, as practitioners work towards defining goals, implementing methods, and measuring “success” in both institutional and community spaces.

Indeed, some of the bridges between “town and gown” have of late been established by digital networks, which open up new possibilities for practitioners. These technological impacts are part of the larger demands of global restructuring following World War II and the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 that opened up the exchange of capital and culture most notably between the U.S. and newly industrializing countries in Asia.<sup>18</sup> The emerging global, diasporic community gave rise to theoretical concepts such as heterogeneity and hybridity.<sup>19</sup> However, this

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<sup>18</sup> See Paul Ong, Edna Bonacich, and Lucie Cheng’s *The New Asian Immigration in Los Angeles and Global Restructuring* (1994). Sau-ling Wong refers to this permeability shift as “denationalization” and contextualizes it in transnational flows of late capitalism and a diasporic perspective. See Wong’s “Denationalization Reconsidered.” See also Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Wong’s *AsianAmerica.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace* (2003).

<sup>19</sup> So too did the agendas of practitioners change to reflect the need to retheorize those connections via channels of cultural and capital exchange already well in place. Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts: On*



diasporic perspective of multiple subjectivities was not easily incorporated into Asian American studies practice, which was still partially rooted in the representational politics of local communities. The obstacles that arose became harmfully articulated again as a divide between “town and gown” and institutionally remembered in the 1998 annual meeting of the Association of Asian American Studies (AAAS), which dealt with the controversy over the Association’s book award winner, Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s *Blu’s Hanging* (1997).<sup>20</sup> Opposition to the AAAS book award that year saw the field’s attempts to foster and anticipate the intellectual growth of Asian American studies as precipitating a departure from the field’s commitments to those claims of working for and with local communities of people.<sup>21</sup> The legacy of the AAAS 1998 book award controversy lingers, as the tensions between academics, artists, and activists have not been fully resolved. Still needed is an effective mode of bridging these different kinds of practitioners and their material realms in order to tap into potential synergies at their sites of overlap.

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*Asian American Cultural Politics* (1996) revised the analytics of Asian American subjectivity to uncover the capitalist agenda behind immigration policies by foregrounding the Asian immigrant as a product whose manual reads many of the state-administered contradictions built into the technology of (especially naturalized) citizenship. See also Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa’s *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (2001) and David Palumbo-Liu’s *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (1999).

<sup>20</sup> AAAS is the largest national, scholarly organization for Asian American studies in North America. The Association’s journal, *JAAS*, is published three times per year by Johns Hopkins University Press. This debate over the book award stemmed from the Yamanaka’s portrayals of Filipino characters and was launched by a mobilized Filipino American (read: single ethnic) community. It was a particular historical moment of theoretical crisis that recalled identity politics to the stand. At issue was the widespread concern over the role of the ethnic writer in belonging to and/or representing an ethnic community, the impact of those dynamics and politics on people’s lived experiences, and the Asian Americanist’s role in articulating and negotiating these tensions.

<sup>21</sup> For more information on the controversy over *Blu’s Hanging*, see, for example, Candace Fujikane’s “Sweeping Racism under the Rug of Censorship” (2000), “*Blu’s Hanging* and the Responsibilities Faced by Local Readers and Writers” (1998); Donna Foote’s “Trouble in Paradise” (1998); Peter Monaghan’s “Asian-American Studies Group in Turmoil over a Rescinded Book Award” (1998); Scott Whitney’s “Naming All the Beasts: Lois-Ann Talks Back” (1998); and Jamie James’ “This Hawaii is Not for Tourists” (1999).

Russell Leong, editor of *Amerasia*, has claimed that Asian Americanists must engage in the work of “translating academic work into vernacular form for publication and dissemination through the community press, cable television and radio; writing for both academic and non-academic readers” (viii), what is commonly defined as the work of the “public intellectual.” While Leong’s arguments may rely too heavily on a public versus private antagonism, by privileging the public as an easily more effective and legitimate space for social justice work, his point to address public audiences and engage in public realms of discourse is relevant for this project’s megatextual approach. Asian Americanist scholarly work should continue to fortify a bridge between theory and practice, and public intellectualism has been one mode for doing so. Yet as the examples that follow demonstrate, the discourse of public intellectualism is insufficient as a bridge between academy and community without the formulation of megatexts. A megatext functions as an archive of material artifacts (novels, articles, interviews, etc.) that renders the discourse of public intellectualism active to interpretation. In addition, a megatextual approach recognizes and enables the rewritability of that discourse through the practice of reading intertextually those archival texts with ones that are newly introduced. Lastly, such an approach allows for a more fluid definition of the public intellectual by positing fiction writers as discursive practitioners. The chapters that follow this Introduction investigate how certain works of fiction and their authors are highly active in the simultaneous functions of a megatext: archivability, interpretability, and rewritability. In this way of viewing artists in the roles of public intellectuals, public

intellectualism can become a more dynamic discourse and thus be more effective in achieving its imperatives.

### **Asian American Public Intellectualism**

Since Asian American studies evolved through community mobilization and activism as a field of academic study in the 1970s, it has both effectively and problematically relied upon the identity construct “Asian American” as well as subsequent iterations (Yellow, Asian Pacific American, Asian/Pacific Islander American, e.g.) for its directives. This construct of Asian American identity has been and continues to be constitutive of complex ideas and processes including those referenced by such concepts as personhood, culture, art, ethnicity, immigration, citizenship, and nationalism. There is little reason to expect the racialization of Asian Americans, or anyone else for that matter, to come to a discrete end. By the same token, there should be sustained confidence that resistance and a strategically positioned Asian American studies will continue to combat social inequities and injustices. My proposal for a megatextual reading practice aims to contribute to these efforts by critically examining the emergence of scholarly self-reflexivity in Asian American studies, through the mode of public intellectualism, as against the emergence of Korean/American fiction writers in public media and social realms.

I argue that a concerted effort to critically identify and analyze a dynamic, rewritable archive that I call a Korean/American megatext through an examination of the role of the public intellectual can attend to problems with both the contemporary manufacturing of Korean/Americanness and the professionalization of Asian

American studies. As my earlier discussion of Elaine Kim began to suggest, the contested figure of the public intellectual is a useful site for configuring a megatext because of the ways in which public intellectualism aims to translate the language of academic work into more accessible texts. Public figures like Cornel West, Toni Morrison, and Frank Wu, for example, are often bestowed the mantle of “public intellectual.” Each is credited with best-selling books, countless media appearances, and academic positions. They write and speak their ideas in a public vernacular and forum; West puts out a hip-hop CD, Morrison appears on Oprah, and Wu lectures at the New York Film Festival.<sup>22</sup>

In a 2002 article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, law professor Frank Wu emphatically claims, “THERE ARE NO Asian-American public intellectuals.” To explain his point, Wu defines the topic in this way: “Public intellectuals lead an open life of the mind, commanding a broad audience with a deep understanding of their specialized fields of inquiry. They serve as translators of sorts: writing accessible prose without technical jargon but with a grasp of the latest peer-reviewed literature.” Wu argues that “while we can probably all cite at least one or two respected Asian-American scholars,” none of these “hardly household names” has “intellectual influence that extends far beyond their campuses” (B12).

The most provocative aspect of this article, however, is the subtext of Wu’s own role as an Asian American public intellectual. His speaking engagements and media appearances span the country and number in the dozens. Wu clearly aims to

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<sup>22</sup>On Cornel West see <http://www.pragmatism.org/library/west/index.htm>; on Toni Morrison see <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/news/96/q4/1025toni.htm>; and on Frank Wu see [http://www.law.wayne.edu/faculty/profiles/wu\\_frank.html](http://www.law.wayne.edu/faculty/profiles/wu_frank.html). Some might add Chang-rae Lee to this list, and I will discuss his arguable role as a public intellectual in the next chapter.

lead an open life of the mind. Furthermore, the fact that he discusses this article on talk radio is evidence of his reaching a broad audience.<sup>23</sup>

During this radio broadcast, Wu explains that one of the reasons why so few Asian Americans enter the public arena is because Asian parents teach their children to be humble and deferent, following Buddhist or Confucian or some Asian custom to exercise verbal and social restraint. So Wu emphasizes the need for more Asian American public intellectuals. He claims that we can begin to address that need by rewriting the notion that Asian Americans are passive and inarticulate.

But when the radio show host Brian Lehrer remarked that the law professor would certainly include himself in a category of Asian American public intellectuals, Wu was quick to deny his membership. Thus, ironically and in practically the same breath, Wu fulfills the very stereotypes he is asking Asian American citizens to shed. In other words, he performs Asian humility at the same time that he seeks to overwrite it.

Wu's perhaps unwitting rehearsal of an Asian cultural stereotype can be seen as a result of the overdetermination that Crystal Parikh examines in ethnic studies. Wu's explanation of Asian cultural deference, the notion that "we" are all taught the same behavior, overdetermines the context of the struggle for more Asian American public intellectuals. Moreover, Wu's antagonistic premise that no Asian American public intellectuals exist may be further overdetermined by its reliance upon a fixed

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<sup>23</sup> Wu appeared as a guest on WNYC New York Public Radio, The Brian Lehrer Show (WNYC 17 Jul. 2002 broadcast) shortly after his article appeared in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

discourse.<sup>24</sup> This kind of flawed public intellectualism is reminiscent of Asian American cultural nationalism. Though both well-meaning and pan-ethnic in their objectives, Asian American cultural nationalism and public intellectualism have not succeeded as movements that can effectively bridge the actions of scholars and activists.

Nevertheless, the desire to mobilize under the category of “Asian American,” or the notion that “your people’s struggle are my people’s struggle” (E. Kim, “*Han*” 228), is still strong in the work of many. The legacies of Chinese Exclusion laws, Japanese American internment, and the Civil Rights movement are important historical sites and still serve as contemporary sources of political agency. However, the categorical identity of “Asian American” continues to operate unsteadily in formations of identity politics. Scholars continue to grapple with the constant interrogation of “to whom and to what ‘Asian American’ refers” (Chuh, *Imagine* 12) and may never resolve the vexing problem of coalitional politics.

Furthermore, if academic and activist practitioners are persistently dealing with the tensions between ethnic-specific and collective agendas, it is no wonder that the current crisis of academia’s becoming unmoored from activism has been insufficiently addressed. We must remember that racial categories are situational. Therefore, ethnic-specific inquiry like a megatextual approach to Korean/American narratives can help combat static and unstable deployments of the category “Asian American” by critically examining texts that are grounded in the material practice of reading, then interpreted for political or social movements, and finally, theorized as

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<sup>24</sup> This analysis relies loosely upon a theory of overdetermination that Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe argue informs post-Marxism. See *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (1985).

discourse. Here, also, the ethnic-specific formulation of a megatext allows for a more manageable archive in that to whom and to what “Korean/American” refers is critically defined and limited to authors, scholars, artists, and texts that have been identified in public discourse as “Korean” and/or “Korean American” with little or no debate.

### **“Korea” in the Media**

In order to equip ourselves with more thorough understandings of how Korean/American ethnic identity is constructed in public realms, I have chosen to include in this project’s formulation of a megatext numerous press articles relating to Korean and Korean/American news subjects. These contemporary articulations lay the material groundwork for the ways in which Korean/Americanness is imagined and understood in mainstream culture. Therefore, whether we are concerned with literary, scholarly, and/or activist projects in a Korean/American megatext, we must consider how that work is being articulated with and against these media formations. By doing so, we begin to read the intertextuality of phantasmatic “Korea” and Korean/American cultural productions. Press articles, as examples of official public discourse, exemplify what Slavoj Žižek calls the “fundamental antagonism” inherent in dominant narratives. I aim to expose the “phantasmatic underside,” or the incongruous, uneven nature of official narratives “about” “Korea.”

Official narratives are informed by dominant ideology, which in contemporary political culture, is in large part being advanced as neoliberalism. Neoliberal politics may endorse formulaic, official narratives and deploy “multiculturalism” in order to

suppress counter-narratives for progressive social movements. The relative “success” of “multiculturalism” has allowed Korean/American narratives to emerge with significant popularity in public realms. As such, these narratives could potentially and harmfully function as “sublime objects” or place-holders for the complex and unequal systems constructing Korean/Americanness.

While hegemony and dominant ideology may continue to construct “Korea” phantasmatically under the purview of U.S. institutions of power, this project aims to demonstrate that through the conceptualization of a Korean/American megatext, we can better negotiate the spatial and critical distance among Korean/American subjects, texts, and authors. With such an extensive critical map in hand, we have a more heterotopic view of Korean/American narratives and are better positioned to make interventions by addressing ourselves to the regions of activism, art, and scholarship. Practitioners in these realms may all be working towards social justice but may be at perceived distances. To work within and between these distances, that is, spaces a megatext claims to occupy, is to bridge ways of thinking and practicing cultural critique.

One way to become familiar with the ways in which “Korea” is constructed phantasmatically is to scan various public news sources. For example, a contemporary news article entitled “All Things Korean are Hot in Asia” cleverly describes the popular culture scene in Asia as “kim chic,” after Korea’s “best known cultural export”—*kim chi*. The article documents everything Korean, “from food and music to eyebrow-shaping and shoe styles” as being “the rage across Asia, where pop culture has long been dominated by Tokyo and Hollywood” (Visser). That things



Korean have become *en vogue* makes for a pop-culture narrative of national identity constituted by cosmetics and boy bands at the same time that it is informed and propelled by past narratives of colonial oppression and the tragedies of war.

Since the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Korea suffered from its vulnerability to military, economic, and cultural invasion from more powerful nations. Hence Korea's two and a half centuries of isolation and its moniker the "Hermit Kingdom." When the Treaty of Kanghwa (1876) with Japan opened up Korea's borders to foreign trade, subsequent treaties with western nations followed. These agreements brought in more foreign economic, religious, and social influence and resulted in Korea's role as a pawn in the struggle between imperial powers. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Korea still suffers from an "image problem" according to its government, which sponsored a slogan contest in search of the best way to "emphasize its passions, traditions, and modernity." Considering the peninsula's divided history, the branding of a modern-day, cosmopolitan "Korea," ostensibly for South Korea as opposed to North Korea, seems to be an important task.<sup>25</sup> "Dynamic Korea" is the slogan the government ended up selecting, though, according to *Time Asia* Seoul correspondent Donald Macintyre, "'Dynamic Korea,' well, just isn't very dynamic." Macintyre cites several possible reasons for the slogan's weak ring: it was recycled from the World Cup 2002 advertising campaign; it does not compare to more clever tourism catch-phrases elsewhere in Asia; or it is simply a defeatist task to try to capture national identity and

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<sup>25</sup> Broadcast over U.S. national media in the 2002 State of the Union address, President George W. Bush referred to North Korea among the "axis of evil," taken from WWII discourse, along with Iran and Iraq in the "war against terrorism." See <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html> for the full address wherein Bush claims, "States like these, and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world."

character in one slogan. Nonetheless, from its colonial history through its modern growth era, “Korea has never been good at pitching itself” (Macintyre “Seoul”).

On the other hand, another “arena” where Korea has been very aggressive about pitching itself and where the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea” significantly exists is in world sports competitions. In 1988, Korea hosted the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, marking Korea’s entrance into the global scene.<sup>26</sup> Then, in 2002, Korea jointly hosted the World Cup with Japan, securing its position as an important player in the global economy.

However, during the World Cup, the U.S.-based media coverage of one of the players on the South Korean national soccer team complicated the image of “Korea” as a good host. Juxtaposed with the media’s coverage of South Korean medal contenders at both the 2002 Winter Olympics (Salt Lake City) and the 2004 Summer Olympics (Athens), “Korea” may further be constructed in the image of a poor sport. For instance, one may recall the 1500-meter short track men’s speedskating event at Salt Lake City, where Korean skater Kim Dong-sung was disqualified for illegally blocking American skater Apolo Ohno. Though Kim crossed the finish line first, an Australian referee ruled that Kim blocked Ohno in the last half-lap, so Ohno was awarded the gold medal. The South Korean delegation responded to this incident with a flurry of protests; likewise, fans responded with various forms of harassment, including death threats, directed at Ohno. These events were all documented by the U.S. media and framed as symptomatic of growing anti-U.S. sentiment in Korea.

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<sup>26</sup> A lingering medal controversy in boxing occurred at the 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea. Roy Jones (U.S.) lost by a 3-2 decision to Park Si Hun (South Korea) in the middleweight event. Jones was later awarded the gold following a 1996 IOC investigation, which revealed that a Korean judge had been bribed. This incident may not be widely remembered, but it is significant in the sport of boxing and certainly can be seen now as part of a series of judging controversies.

Though not explicitly articulated in the official U.S. press, part of the Korean hostility towards Ohno can be attributed to the skater's Japanese ancestry. Ohno is bi-racial: his father is Japanese American, and his mother is Caucasian. Korea's traumatic history of colonization by Japan still evokes anti-Japanese sentiment even in young Koreans who have no first-hand memory of the occupation. In unofficial spaces such as Internet forums, young Koreans vehemently expressed their anti-Ohno/anti-Japanese/anti-U.S. sentiment as if the conflation of the three was a function of their national loyalty and pride. This discursive subtext gestures towards the ways in which sports competition, especially as it is represented in the media, serves as a place-holder for war. Koreans experienced the conflict between the two speedskaters, Ohno and Kim, so deeply that it simultaneously registered for them a history of Japanese colonial oppression and also a current condition of U.S. occupation. The sporting conflict serves as a place-holder for war because it registers the phantasmatic dimension of war, namely, the remnants of colonialism.

Just months after the closing ceremony at Salt Lake City, Korea served as co-host to the 2002 World Cup competition. Korean fans cheered vigorously for its home team, especially in the Red Devils' match against the U.S. When Korea's star heart-throb striker Ahn Jung-hwan scored a game-tying goal, he "ran to one corner of the field and performed what South Koreans call an 'Ohno ceremony,' simulating speedskating gestures. A half-dozen teammates joined him, sliding back and forth as if on the ice" (Shin). The Korean Red Devils' unsportsmanlike conduct reflected what was still felt by the Korean people to be the entire country's bitter defeat at Salt Lake City to the U.S.

Ohno responded to the press with a sense of humor: “Ahn needs practice. I was looking at the guy, and he doesn’t even have good technique. He’s got to sit lower, keep his shoulder straight” (*St. Petersburg Times*). Yet, just when it seemed this conflict had been put to rest, the gold medal was again in dispute at the 2004 Summer Games in Athens. This time, in the men’s gymnastics competition, South Korea’s Yang Tae-young claimed that a scoring error cost him the victory and incorrectly awarded the gold to Paul Hamm of the U.S. team. But, the Court of Arbitration for Sport dismissed the protest and Hamm retained the gold. Nonetheless, all of these events read intertextually script a patterned story of a proud, stubborn, underdog Korea and a superior, victorious U.S.

These are but a few examples of the ways in which the construction of a national identity for Korea has taken place in U.S.-based media. The connections are evident, moreover, between the media’s articulation of Korea’s involvement in global sports competition and Korean/American responses to those phantasmatic constructions. A related *Washington Post* story, for example, titled “In Homes, Korea vs. U.S.: Immigrant Families Split on Watching World Cup, Whom to Back,” interviewed DC-area Korean immigrant parents and their children. The article depicts the parents, life-long soccer enthusiasts, proudly rooting for Korea, and their children, born and/or raised in the U.S., asserting their Americanness, rooting for the U.S.—“all in good fun, of course” (Cho). However, when read intertextually, the lore that these journalistic narratives construct—a bitter history of Korean anti-U.S. sentiment tied to a bootstrap narrative of Korean immigrant life in the U.S.—is one that is potentially limiting for understandings of Korean/Americanness.

These texts contain sound bites that have the potential to devolve into harmful discourse, or “a quote contextualized for someone else’s agenda” (E. Kim, “Home” 222). Similar to Judith Butler’s formulation of the media’s visual record of the Gulf War, which she maintains was “not a reflection of the war, but the enactment of its phantasmatic structure,” the media’s textual record of Korean/Americanness becomes “part of the very means by which it is socially constituted and maintained” (11) and by which Korean/Americanness gets articulated in limited or isolated arenas.

### **A Korean/American Megatext as Intervention**

Korean/American authors similarly can function as figures or agents who are producing social meaning about Korean/Americanness for mainstream consumption. As a by-product of “multiculturalism,” the Korean/American text risks becoming commodified. It would follow, then, that the role of the Korean/American author primarily becomes that of producer of those commodities. This cycle of production and consumption needs to be read with more critical consideration of the complex “underside” and the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea.”

Many contemporary Korean/American writers use narration as a process for expressing concerns that they identify are a function of belonging to a Korean/American group identity. For example, Korean/American memoirs by Helie Lee (*Still Life with Rice*, 1996 and *In the Absence of the Sun*, 2002), and sisters Frances and Ginger Park (*To Swim Across the World*, 2001) as well as novels like Patti Kim’s *A Cab Called Reliable* (1998), Susan Choi’s *The Foreign Student* (2003), and Suki Kim’s *The Interpreter* (2004) are popular Korean/American literary texts in

the mainstream publishing arena. Also circulating in this market is Leonard Chang who has published numerous short stories, and novels, the last three of which, *Over the Shoulder* (2001), *Underkill* (2003), and *Fade to Clear* (2004), comprise a Korean/American detective series. This list is just a sampling of texts that this project could examine or include in a future expansion. However, in my readings of Korean/American literary texts, work by Chang-rae Lee, Don Lee, and Nora Okja Keller emerge as exemplary.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, the number and variety of texts to which one has immediate and reasonable access is essential to the formulation of a megatext. Primarily because Chang-rae Lee, Don Lee, and Keller and their works are widely occurring in culture, my project is anchored by discussions of them. Also, these authors and their works point to contemporary discourses that are at the forefront of Asian American studies scholarship, activism, and public intellectualism. The following chapters offer interdisciplinary analyses of megatexts, each formulated specifically for the author, in order to demonstrate more broadly how a Korean/American megatext is conversant with methods of inquiry critically advanced by both Asian American and literary studies.

Though with the same exigence and theoretical framework, I formulate megatexts differently for each chapter. The fact that an author and work cross-reference a unique and vast archive, even, for example, around just his/her first novel, requires each chapter's megatextual approach to vary. The Chang-rae Lee chapter's megatext references a contemporary archive of the author and his work in the shape of what may be critically considered as a "phenomenon." Chang-rae Lee is the most

“writerly” writer of the three I consider here, based on the educational and literary prestige with which he and his work are associated. The Don Lee chapter’s megatext references a contemporary archive of the author’s explicit marketing of his own work. As such, the contemporary discourses to which his fiction points become questioned for their subjective value in the current economy. Both of these chapters’ discussions connect to my analyses above concerning current and recent political conditions and responses to them in the field of Asian American studies. The Nora Okja Keller chapter’s megatext references both a contemporary and, more explicitly, a historical archive of “Korea.” This historical archive calls upon discourses of gender and figurations of Korean/American women’s bodies that prove necessary as contexts through which we must conceive of Korean/Americanness.

Chapter one examines author Chang-rae Lee through intertextual readings of his novels, his career, and the discourse surrounding Lee’s authorship. Close readings of Lee’s three novels, with particular focus on *Native Speaker* (1995), together with an application of Michel Foucault’s theory of the author-function illuminate the literary and theoretical methods used to formulate megatexts around literary works in this project. Those analyses rewrite the archive of a larger Korean/American megatext because of the dynamic meanings produced through interpretation, or the “lore” that author Chang-rae Lee and his novels in particular construct. For example, because of those constructions, *Native Speaker* and the controversial One City, One Book program, among other texts and discourses, articulate Lee as a “writerly” writer.

Chapter two discusses Don Lee and his first published collection, *Yellow*, a short story sequence that re-presents Korean/American identity constructions through its use of generic conventions and existing understandings of identity.<sup>27</sup> *Yellow*'s reliance upon literary traditions and identity politics enable Lee to market his text, and thus himself as an author, in contemporary culture. Building on the previous chapter's discussion of the author-function, this chapter also considers Don Lee's role as an editor and a writer in the commercial realm of literary fiction as the basis for the "doubleness" of an author and his work. I consider Don Lee and *Yellow* through the double functions of knowledge production and commodification. For example, I posit Don Lee's self-marketing and his reviewing Chang-rae Lee's third novel as examples of a kind of public intellectualism, which, as I claim above, can be operational if employed in conjunction with the formulation of a megatext.

Chapter three examines the novels *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl* by Nora Okja Keller in order to read how Korean/American women's bodies are constructed through gendered, experiential narratives that circulate and register in a megatext. Read intertextually, these representations of Korean/American women's bodies inscribe a pattern that is emblematic of the gendered, neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and Korea. This chapter draws from interdisciplinary methods and various texts that construct Korean/American womanhood through the figure of the "camptown prostitute," which can be considered as one of the "dangerous women" figures that Elaine Kim and Chungmoo Choi have identified as emblemizing the systemic inequities of U.S.-Korea relations. For example, Keller's narratives force us

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<sup>27</sup> In this chapter, I do not discuss Lee's second published work and first novel, *Country of Origin*. The novel's time of publication, July 2004, and this dissertation's timeline for writing did not allow for deep enough consideration of a comparable archive around that work.



to examine the “postcolonial challenges Korean and diasporic Korean women face” (Kim and Choi 2), which I do here by formulating a megatext that references other kinds of ethnographic and journalistic texts.

I conclude by looking at the figure of Margaret Cho and her performative text *I'm the One That I Want* as a way of gesturing towards the ever-changing and expanding Korean/American megatext and possibilities for collaborative knowledge production in such fields as women's, performance, and new media studies. Margaret Cho offers also an example of an emergent Korean/Americanness that draws from contexts of gender and racial formations that have been constructed by and through queerness and/or blackness. Cho's presence in entertainment media exemplifies the ways in which Korean/Americanness is distributed physically, politically, and relationally. This discussion of a non-literary text also allows me to gesture towards current and future political possibilities for megatexts, as they propose to be ongoing and self-perpetuating rewritable archives.

This project's formulation of megatexts, and its critical practice of reading megatexts conceptualized for each chapter, seeks to offer an alternative method for articulating meaning “about” Korean/Americanness. Since Korean/Americanness is but one exemplary mode of contemporary cultural construction and a megatextual approach to it is only one mode of inquiry, this project hopes to prove applicable for other modes that seek equally to bridge communities, ideas, and approaches towards better conducting social justice work. As this Introduction has established the project's arguments, the next chapter will detail a specific method for formulating a megatext around author Chang-rae Lee.

## Chapter 1: “Personal Lore”: A Chang-rae Lee Megatext of Fiction and Authorship

Of course, in his personal lore he would have said that he started with \$200 in his pocket and a wife and baby and just a few words of English. Knowing what every native loves to hear, he would have offered the classic immigrant story, casting himself as the heroic newcomer, self-sufficient, resourceful. –Henry Park on his father, *Native Speaker* (49-50).

Chang-rae Lee is a second-generation Korean/American author whose novels may be seen as products of post-1965 Asian immigration to the U.S. He is also among a second wave of Korean/American writers who have “grown into their artistry” (E. Kim, “Korean” 157). Following a first wave of texts that emerged roughly from 1970-1990, *Native Speaker* has achieved more acclaim than any other Korean/American novel in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>28</sup> However, while the author and his novels have been widely praised by the mainstream literary establishment and consistently studied in the academy, Asian Americanist scholars have yet to explore critically the explanations for Lee’s and his novels’ popularity.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> A significant number of novel-length writings by Korean/American authors were published during the 1990s; however, most are non-fiction personal narratives/family histories. Some authors include Mary Paik Lee, Helie Lee, Mia Yun, Frances and Ginger Park, and Elizabeth Kim. One writer even incorporates her autobiography into a Korean cookbook. See Hi Soon Shin Heppinstal’s *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen: A Cookbook* (Ten Speed Press, 2001) product description: “Part memoir and part cookbook, *Growing Up in a Korean Kitchen* is one woman’s cultural and culinary story, weaving childhood reminiscences with lovingly gathered recipes” (<http://www.amazon.com>).

<sup>29</sup> An example of a substantively positive review is Peter Monaghan’s “A Korean-American Novelist’s Impressive Debut” in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Rands Richard Cooper wrote a mostly positive review, “Excess Identities,” in the *New York Times Book Review*. See Song (2001), Crystal

Alongside or in conjunction with the proliferation of Korean/American narratives, mainstream readerships and reading advocacy groups have embraced Chang-rae Lee and his novels. How can we apprehend this phenomenon? This question is at the center of this chapter. To help us answer it, I will apply a megatextual approach to reading *Native Speaker* and Chang-rae Lee as cultural phenomena by accessing an archive of texts that is actively recording and dynamically referencing these functions for the novel and the author.

Scholar Sau-ling Wong posed similar questions about Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) to investigate what made the novel and author such a "phenomenon." In her essay, "'Sugar Sisterhood': Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon," Wong claims that Tan's "click with the times" can be understood if we locate Tan's work at the confluence of several discursive traditions, such as feminist/matrilineal discourse, ethnic literary studies, Orientalist discourse, and multiculturalist rhetoric (175-76, 202). David Palumbo-Liu also asks after the popularity of Tan's writings among other Asian American literary works. He proposes that their common thematic—how the "most popular texts tend to be perceived as resolutions to a generalized 'problem' of racial, ethnic, and gendered identities"—is strategically marketed as such so that these texts are simultaneously "representatives of an eccentric 'ethnic' literature as well as models of successful assimilation to the core" (*A/A* 396). In a way similar to Wong and Palumbo-Liu, I pursue the popularity of the author Chang-rae Lee and the novel *Native Speaker* in order to understand what "times" resonate at this particular conjunction.

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Parikh (2002), Tina Chen (2002), and Tim Engles (1997) for scholarly essays on *Native Speaker*. Rachel C. Lee (2004) examines *Native Speaker* in terms of the One City, One Book debate.

As I discussed in the Introduction, literature representing Korean/American characters, experiences, histories, and cultures contributes to a patterning of Korean/Americanness that manifests beyond the realm of literary study. This pattern originates with the text, becomes sketched through the practice of reading, and then becomes underscored through a text's dynamic interaction with other discourses and different kinds of texts with similar narratives. In this chapter and the chapters that follow, I show how manifestations of Korean/Americanness are being read multiply and variously in contemporary culture in ways that create a pattern of meaning that is dynamic and rewritable. The pattern inscribed by the emergence of Chang-rae Lee's authorship in culture is apprehended by the megatextual approach I specifically promote here in this chapter.

I examine constructions of Korean/Americanness by collecting and critically examining three discussions surrounding Chang-rae Lee. First, I investigate the popularity of the author, by using Michel Foucault's theory of the "author-function." Next, I analyze major characters Henry Park and John Kwang as political figures through several, converging discourses: public and private spheres, "model minority" discourse, and the politics of space. Considering *Native Speaker* at the convergence of these discourses in this second section lends itself to a brief, comparative analysis of Lee's subsequent novels, *A Gesture Life* and *Aloft*. And lastly, I illuminate the prior sections by accessing a historical archive of Korean and Korean/American nationalisms, the formations of which have occurred under the pressures of imperial and/or state power. The complex relationships of power between subjects and the nation-state that undergird Korean/American cultural productions are being actively

referenced in the readings I offer of *Native Speaker* and Chang-rae Lee's authorship. This formulation of a megatext applied to Lee and his popularity enables us to see both what underlies that popularity and the efficacy of this reading practice.

As explained more fully in the Introduction, a megatext is a rewritable archive where knowledge is simultaneously amassed and overwritten. In mapping the reach of a megatext, we find numerous "site[s] that witness the national contradiction" (R. Lee, "Reading" 348). I show here how "model minority" discourse is one site that informs the reception of Lee and his work. The construction of the "model minority" is an example of the national contradiction because as a technology of liberalism, the "model minority" stereotype offers a limited or false sense of access to social equality. In this chapter, I suggest that bearing witness to these inequities through mapping and reading a Chang-rae Lee megatext forces a critical consideration of the contradictions inherent in contemporary U.S. political culture, which took form in the late twentieth century as neoliberalism.<sup>30</sup>

In brief, the emergence of neoliberalism upholds market capitalism as the "organizing principal for all political, social, and economic decisions" (Giroux 2). This system effectively undermines the ideals of democracy through a constant attack on the social contract, known as the emphasis on equality and service to the greater public good. Particularly, this chapter's approach illuminates neoliberalism's "emergent 'multicultural' . . . politics—a stripped-down, nonredistributive form of

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<sup>30</sup> Lisa Duggan defines neoliberalism as a "new vision of national and world order," which is a "vision of competition, inequality, market 'discipline,' public austerity, and 'law and order'" (x). See Duggan also for a brief history of the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S. out of old-world Liberalism and as it has been forwarded by the dismantling of the New Deal consensus, pro-business or conservative activism, the myth of multiculturalism, and overall attacks on downwardly redistributive social movements and public institutions and spaces in favor of upward redistribution of resources. Henry Giroux decries the "terror of neoliberalism" as what depoliticizes political culture. See Giroux also for mention of multiple sites and global forms of resistance to neoliberal capitalism.

‘equality’” (Duggan xii). By asking how the popularity of Chang-rae Lee reinforces “model minority” constructions of Korean/Americans, I hope not only to critique neoliberal multicultural politics but also to recoup the social and cultural capital invested in Lee’s “click with the times” for Korean/American political empowerment.

The popularity of Chang-rae Lee and his novels appends and rewrites an archive of popular Asian American immigrant narratives, which scholars like Wong, Palumbo-Liu, and Frank Chin have identified.<sup>31</sup> A contributive factor to the reasons why Asian American narratives continue to find favorable reception in mainstream society is the implementation of neoliberal multicultural initiatives in institutions of higher learning and corporate business. The ongoing impact of neoliberalism and global capitalism on U.S. domestic policy has included multicultural agendas or diversity programs, which have consistently targeted Asian Americans, among others. In the contemporary moment, U.S. neoliberal politics and economics have conditioned the construction of Asian Americanness in subtle ways: for example, the “model minority myth” (which I detail shortly), the institutionalization of Asian American studies, and the professionalization of Asian American subjects. Therefore, gendered, raced, and classed constructions are understood through a discourse of intersectionality, and the constructedness becomes more sophisticated. For instance, neoliberalism’s continued aggressive marketing and distribution of Asian and Asian American narratives, like those by and about Chang-rae Lee, in U.S. mainstream culture implicitly supports the technology of Asian Americans as the “model minority.”

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<sup>31</sup> In addition to the Wong and Palumbo-Liu essays mentioned above, Frank Chin’s “Come All Ye Asian American Writers Of the Real and Of the Fake” is an early critique of popular Asian American authors.

However, though the “model minority” designation positively identifies a group’s socio-economic achievements, the technology must be decoded for the ways in which it masks structural inequities. As stated in the Introduction, this project limits its scope to Korean/American formations through its argument to apprehend Korean/Americanness through a megatext. A megatextual approach to reading Chang-rae Lee figures the author as an ideal subject through which we may examine the complex interplay of market forces, political movements, and media practices that constructs Korean/Americanness up against the glass ceiling of the “model minority.” This examination is but one way of contributing to the oppositional politics forged by Asian American and ethnic studies.

“Model minority” discourse, in brief, critically examines the ways in which Asian Americans have been represented in social texts as the most successful immigrant group in the U.S. during the second half of the twentieth century. It is invested in how those representations establish superficial frameworks against which both Asian Americans and other minority groups are measured. The systemic effect of the “model minority” construction is containment—glass ceilings restricting social access and limited resources for political empowerment, which signify the “false promises of superficial neoliberal ‘multiculturalism’” (Duggan xx). The “model minority” construction has been and continues to be indicative of state anxiety over the presence of Asian Americans in political culture. Insofar as textual representations of Asian Americans as the “model minority” are still widespread and circulating as exemplary of the “success” of multiculturalism, the deployment of the “model minority” seeks to quell Asian American political activism. These hidden

anxieties, what Slavoj Žižek terms the “phantasmatic underside,” fuel the national contradiction between equality for its citizens and the economic imperatives of capitalism. These contradictions, as Lisa Lowe has put it, erupt in culture (22) and are revealed here through the simultaneous endorsement and suppression of author Chang-rae Lee and his novels.

In the next section, I investigate Chang-rae Lee’s career as an author by tracking mainstream media’s record of him and his first novel, *Native Speaker*. This context is important for employing Foucault’s “author-function” theory to read Chang-rae Lee as a social figure.

### **1) The Authorship of Chang-rae Lee**

Crossing the threshold of the new millennium, Chang-rae Lee has taken the literary and academic worlds by storm.

The *New Yorker* recently named Chang-rae Lee one of the “Twenty Best Fiction Writers Under Forty.” His first two novels, *Native Speaker* and *Gesture Life*, won a host of literary honors, including the Hemingway/PEN Award for Best First Novel, QPB’s New Voices Award, the Barnes & Noble Discover Great New Writers Award, an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation, the Oregon Book Award, the NAIBA Book Award for Fiction, the Asian-American Literary Award, the Annisfield-Wolf Book Award, and the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award. (University of Chicago News Office)



This list is just a sampling of the awards the novels have won. Lee's success has taken many forms. In July 2002, he accepted a faculty position, Professor in the Council of the Humanities and Creative Writing, at Princeton University. The following year, the Princeton Public Library in conjunction with the Arts Council, High School, and University featured Chang-rae Lee and *Native Speaker* in the first annual "Princeton Reads" program of events. The program offered readings by the author, discussions of the novel, and celebration of Korean and Korean/American culture "in honor of *Native Speaker*."<sup>32</sup>

In order to understand how these accolades are significant for constructions of Korean/Americanness, it is helpful to consider authorship as a theoretical function. Michel Foucault advances the "author-function" to examine the author as an individual and to analyze the "singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it" (115). Foucault considers two themes. First, he states that writing "has freed itself from the necessity of 'expression,'" making it recognizable in public culture as an "interplay of signs, regulated less by the content it signifies than by the very nature of the signifier." Second, Foucault states that the "voluntary obliteration of the self...takes place in the everyday existence of the writer," thus establishing the "kinship between writing and death" (116-17). The act of writing "kills" the author because language takes over as structural agent, and the author is merely a function of language or a product of the text. So, the author is decentered or deconstructed, his/her individuality lost.

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<sup>32</sup> This quotation was posted on the Princeton Library's Web site, where its 2003 events, reading guide, and additional resources on *Native Speaker* were previously advertised.

Following Foucault, if we can begin to de-emphasize personhood and conceive of the author Chang-rae Lee as a product, then only the writing remains—what he writes in his novels, what is written about him in media and scholarly texts, and what I write about his authorship in formulating a Korean/American megatext at this present moment. Therefore, even though this discussion of authorship will look at texts relating to Chang-rae Lee himself, this study does not aim to scrutinize the author as a person but to question the function of authorship in the construction of Korean/Americanness. In this way, we further this project’s aim of reading the intertextuality among texts that are emergent from and circulating in multiple arenas and that dynamically interact to produce meaning about Korean/Americanness.

In order to take up the question of the author as a product of the text, Foucault raises the significance of our using the author’s name when the author disappears. The name of the author is a proper name and a signifier that designates a specific and discrete historical individual. In addition, the author’s name is an identification of the discourse surrounding the author, such as the “thoughts he is attributed with, the mode of thinking, the objects of contemplation, the methodology, and/or the writings (or forms of discourse) associated with that name” (Klages). However, Foucault raises some practical considerations, for example: “Assuming that we are dealing with an author, is everything he wrote and said, everything he left behind, to be included in his work?” and “can we agree on what ‘everything’ means?” (118). To clarify his point, Foucault asks if a “laundry bill” should be included in an author’s works.

Such a question relates to this study of Chang-rae Lee and its inquiry into how to assess the weight of texts and discourses in the conceptualization of a megatext. Given that there is much published information on, about, or referencing the author and/or his writing, my approach to identifying texts that may be included in this chapter relies upon theories of intertextuality. As I detailed in the Introduction, intertextuality allows us to draw a discursive connection between two or multiple texts through theme or ideology, temporality or spatiality. Intertextuality attests to the heteroglossic nature of Korean/Americanness, as it is apprehended by this present practice of constructing and reading a megatext.<sup>33</sup> Foucault's author-function allows for this chapter's consideration of mainstream media texts, which can be considered products of authorship and culture. A published interview, for example, continues to exist once the author "disappears."

Foucault uses four major points to describe the author-function, or how the author is a function of discourse. First, authorship is a form of property, caught up in a circuit of ownership. Second, the author-function historically has not always applied in the same way to the same kinds of texts. Third, it is a cultural construction that is not formed spontaneously. And fourth, the text always bears signs that refer to the author or that create the author-function. Foucault suggests that the author-function arises out of the difference and separation between the author-function and the writer signified in the text (Klages). As the author disappears, "we should reexamine the empty space left" and "attentively observe, along its gaps and fault lines, its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void" (121). The manner in which these conceptual author-less spaces become redistributed when we examine

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<sup>33</sup> See discussion of intertextuality beginning on page 13.

Chang-rae Lee's author-function is a key element for critically understanding the dynamic construction of Korean/Americanness.

A survey of articles on Chang-rae Lee in popular media shows how Lee as an author is constructed as a function of discourse. For example, one article reveals a significant amount of detail on Lee's personal and family history. Charles McGrath, editor of the *New York Times Book Review* and friend of Chang-rae Lee, writes, "The experience of Lee's parents was in many respects the classic drama of immigration, although in a slightly privileged version -- the old story of working hard, trying to fit in and sacrificing everything for your children" (1). "Chang," as McGrath familiarly calls the writer, was born in Seoul in 1965. His father was a medical student who immigrated to the States in 1968 to begin his psychiatric residency at Pittsburgh. Six months later, Lee, his sister and mother immigrated, and the family moved to Westchester, New York. Raised in those affluent suburbs as the son of a physician, Lee then attended Phillips Academy Exeter and Yale University. After graduating from Yale, Lee took his first job as a Wall Street equities analyst, which he soon quit to pursue his passion for writing at the University of Oregon. His writing career up through the publication of his second novel, *A Gesture Life*, took off while he directed the MFA program at Hunter College, CUNY. He then accepted the faculty position at Princeton and published his third novel, *Aloft* (2004).

Alongside this brief biography, we cannot help but observe parallels between life and art. For example, with regards to *Native Speaker*, protagonist Henry Park's struggles with language seem an apt metaphor for author Chang-rae Lee's "initiation of becoming American" (E. Kim, "Home" 220). Crystal Parikh identifies, "While

[Henry's] face registers him as the other of the national body that is the minority immigrant, his voice links him to a class that has 'made it,' has successfully assimilated to the dominant language and culture" (276). Similarly, the author's personal history and career have afforded him membership into a class of "model minority" intellectuals that has "made it" in the American academy and literati.<sup>34</sup> And just as Henry's face is "part of the equation" that betrays he is not a native speaker (Lee 12), the perceived success of Chang-rae Lee and *Native Speaker* are qualified by "model minority" constructions. The limits of the One City, One Book movement attest to this qualified success.

Chang-rae Lee's career move from Hunter College in New York City to Princeton University in New Jersey parallels the region's reading advocacy movement for *Native Speaker*. The "Princeton Reads" program, mentioned above, came about on the coattails of a New York City reading advocacy campaign called "One City, One Book." The One City, One Book organizing committee, comprised of librarians, bookstore owners, and educators, narrowed the selections down to Lee's *Native Speaker* and *The Color of Water*, a memoir by James McBride about growing up in an interracial family.

At the time of choosing, some committee members were concerned that *Native Speaker* was "not engaging enough for high school students and might offend some Asian-Americans." But, members of the New York Women's Agenda, one of the campaign's sponsors, stated that McBride's novel might be offensive to Hassidic Jews, so Lee's novel "partly as a result" was chosen (Kirkpatrick Feb. 19). A few months later, the Women's Agenda changed its mind, citing concerns that *Native*

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<sup>34</sup> See Crystal Parikh and Frank Wu for more on the role of the ethnic intellectual.

*Speaker* “was not going to be appropriate for high school students,” while the rest of the committee backed out (Kirkpatrick May 10). While the Women’s Agenda attempted to faction off and promote *The Color of Water* outside of schools, the program lost the backing of the city’s librarians and educators and failed to come to fruition.<sup>35</sup> Still, even though *Native Speaker* did not become the city’s One Book, its selection garnered much debate.

Fern Jaffe, owner of the Paperbacks Plus bookstore in the Bronx, supported the One City, One Book program and the selection. She stated, “I wanted people to hear the sounds and the stories that our people --New York people -- have to tell about life here, and this book does it.” Harold Bloom, on the other hand, said of the civic reading program, “It is rather like the idea that we are all going to pop out and eat Chicken McNuggets or something else horrid at once.” As Lee’s former professor, Bloom added, “I think in a way it is unfair to the young man, because his book cannot bear the weight of it. Alas, it is political correctness, and we know what that is worth.” African American author and columnist Stanley Crouch found *Native Speaker* “overrated” because of its alleged focus on an immigrant narrative; he stated, “It is far more important for Americans to address interracial and cross-ethnic relations than immigration” (Kirkpatrick Feb. 19). Many more differing opinions were voiced, and these last two seem to suggest that *Native Speaker* should not have been nominated at all.

Though One City, One Book was a failed and perhaps misguided movement, institutional groups still wished to endorse Chang-rae Lee and his novels, as

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<sup>35</sup> *Library Journal*, 6/1/2002 (Vol. 127 Issue 10, p. 15) notes the announcement of NY Libraries not to pursue the One City, One Book campaign.

evidenced by the Princeton Reads program. The narrative of *Native Speaker*, seen through a close reading of the figure of John Kwang, identifies a nexus of power and production in the neoliberal city of New York. The meta-narrative of *One City, One Book* suggests that this nexus is unstable. Like John Kwang aims to do in the narrative, this chapter's megatextual approach to *Native Speaker* and Chang-rae Lee seeks to expose unstable power structures. Even following such failures as that of *One City, One Book* and the figure of John Kwang, we should continue to inquire further into issues of cultural politics in our efforts to recuperate power and redistribute resources more equitably.

Through the formulation of a Korean/American megatext, we can better apprehend and respond to the discourses that are dynamically emerging and that converge to produce meaning about a text. Many of these interactions begin with the close reading of a text. The intertextuality of the figures, narratives, and discourses informing the novel *Native Speaker*, to which I now attend, help illuminate in more detail the constructions of Korean/Americanness circulating variously through the formulation of a megatext.

## **2) Intertextuality of *Native Speaker***

*Native Speaker* is a novel that explores Korean/American subjectivities in social, political, economic, and cultural contexts through its location in contemporary New York City. Contextualizing *Native Speaker* in social history, the novel imagines the post-1965 Korean immigrant demographic, which chiefly included educated and/or skilled young adults and, if applicable, their families. The novel's protagonist,

Henry Park, says of being born to Korean parents who immigrated to the U.S., “My citizenship is an accident of birth, my mother delivering me on this end of a long plane ride from Seoul” (334). John Kwang, the novel’s antagonist, is also a Korean immigrant who emblemizes an immigrant “bootstrap” narrative, having toiled and struggled to find his way in the land of opportunity.

*Native Speaker* (1995) was published during a period of perceived crisis and resonated with a U.S. political culture “when anti-immigration sentiments were being fueled by collective anxiety about limited resources and job opportunities for ‘legitimate’ subject-citizens” (Park and Wald 609). During the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Palumbo-Liu posits that Asians were being (dis)located in America and how “Asian/American” identity was emerging through the reconstruction and remapping of national space. As a result, heterogeneous narratives and intersectional subjectivities were being produced simultaneously in local and global spheres (*A/A* 296). Therefore, under these conditions, *Native Speaker* enters into U.S. culture and engages with transnational shifting boundaries.

In their essay, “Native Daughters in the Promised Land,” You-me Park and Gayle Wald examine how *Native Speaker* “mostly concerns itself with the legitimation of a male immigrant subject in the public sphere” (609). I extend their work to consider the novel as produced and read in both public and private spheres of knowledge in order to show how critical attentiveness to the intersectionality of these spheres is necessary for understanding what I have thus far discussed as the critical and mainstream popularity of Lee and his work. That is, I read texts that can be located in either public or private spheres—the novel, the author, literary criticism,



reception, interviews, etc.—as simultaneously producing knowledge about Korean/Americanness. Chang-rae Lee’s “click with the times,” coinciding with current debates over politics and culture, requires attention to the modes of access between public and private spheres allowing for the novel *Native Speaker*’s mainstream success.

Specifically, I consider a public/private dialectic through critiques that focus on race and gender. For example, as Park and Wald assert, “it is obvious that the public sphere is implicitly and explicitly racialized as well as gendered—that is, normatively defined as masculine *and* white, and accessed via a privileged relation to patriarchal and white supremacist discourses” (613). And when, as in *Native Speaker*, the public sphere is accessed by and populated with non-normative subjects, the “subjective *value*” of public versus that of private becomes difficult to evaluate using normative standards. The distinction between public and private remains contingent upon intersecting discourses of gender, race, ethnicity and citizenship, thus favoring a dialectical consideration of public and private spheres. An intertextual reading of the novel with other kinds of texts enables us to imagine public and private spheres as dynamically interacting with and rewriting each other.

Access to social power in either public or private spheres may be attained in many different ways, largely through advances in technologies that affect how information (and therefore, culture and knowledge) is produced and exchanged. In short, *Native Speaker*’s portrayal of race and gender resonated with the social and economic upward mobility of second-generation, post-1965 Asian Americans and the resultant shifts in two related discourses: the discourse of public and private,

consisting of “alternative publics” or “socially pliable spheres” (612); and, the discourse of transnationalism, both of which inform U.S.-based consumption of literary fiction. *Native Speaker*, Chang-rae Lee, and their relationships to these discourses also reflect what was being said in and about the field of Asian American studies.

An example of these shifts can be seen in the figure of the “Asian (American) cyborg,” posited by Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Wong. The Asian (American) cyborg acknowledges the complex imaginary formation of Asian American subjectivities at the intersection of Asian American studies, Internet technologies, and political categories for defining bodies. The Asian American cyborg functions as the “transnational Asian American border crosser and gender-bend[er]” who conveniently “projects twenty-first century anxieties regarding the porosity of national boundaries, the spread of global capital, and the transformation of a large domain of social relations into commodified exchanges” (xiv). Critical consideration of *Native Speaker*’s popularity helps make sense of the complex exchanges and technological advances occurring in these discourses. *Native Speaker* portrays how Korean/American subjects have different levels of access to public or private spheres and transnational spaces.

When, for example, the narrative ends with Henry resigned to the apartment he and Lelia share and with John Kwang exiled to Korea, we observe the qualified or temporary inclusion of the Korean/American subject in U.S. culture. The novel’s resolution is exemplary of the ways in which *Native Speaker* interacts with contemporary discourses. This dynamic interaction of text and historical moment

contributes to the novel's success among mainstream readers, for it helps readers make sense of the complex systems at work in a transnational economy and culture. Not only does the novel help readers decode some of the motivations undergirding transnational exchange, but also it allows them to apprehend such understanding with safe outcomes. The novel's conclusion contains or removes volatile elements of political culture while it simultaneously acknowledges the presence of the Korean/American border-crosser and isolates him to the private sphere. Thus, this novel and author are at once validated and denied. Their popularity attests to the fact that they are endorsed for their ability to translate the global moment into domestic, neoliberal language. But the failure of the narrative's characters and the failure of *One City, One Book* suggest that both novel and author are suppressed for their potential to inspire a revolutionary moment. Close readings of specific characters and narrative moments, which I demonstrate next, further illuminate this contradiction, particularly through the lenses of "model minority" discourse and the politics of space. The importance of recognizing these literary examples through conceiving of and reading them megatextually help us to expose specific instabilities of current political culture in an effort to offer new methods towards garnering political power.

Many of Lee's characters are constantly negotiating their positions of centrality and marginality. Through specific narration of the characters' spatial locations and mobility, the narratives reveal different modes and levels of access to public and private spheres. *Native Speaker*'s setting in contemporary New York City—an emblematic urban, multiethnic, neoliberal space—is appropriate ground for Lee to map out a quasi-spy novel whose "mystery" is written onto immigrant

characters reflecting or representing racial, ethnic, classed, and gendered subjectivities. New York City has served as an important site of inquiry for the particular ways in which the City figures in contests with and over space among race- and class-stratified communities that are under a superstructure of advanced capitalism. As Samuel R. Delany argues, spatial conflict in New York City can be understood as “socioeconomic antagonism between the *classes*” (114), which can be attributed to the “erosion of the social practices through which interclass communication takes place and of the institutions holding those practices stable” (111).

*Native Speaker*, which narrativizes the failed redistribution of resources to the City’s immigrant communities (Kwang’s demise and the dismantling of his *ggeh*), was published during the Clinton era of “Neoliberal New Democrats.” The novel’s publication in a political climate that “included civil rights/equality politics within a framework that minimized any downwardly redistributing impulses and effects” (Duggan xix) highlights this erosion of social practices as a function of the neoliberal city. Furthermore, as *Native Speaker* (and perhaps all three of Chang-rae Lee’s novels) suggests, the possibilities for those characters who are immigrant subjects, regardless of their classed positions, are rather bleak.

At the end of *Native Speaker*, for example, Henry resigns himself to his wife Lelia’s space, performing the role of the “Speech Monster,” who wears a green rubber hood and will “gobble up kids” in Lelia’s speech class if they mispronounce words (348). When our narrator Henry is concluding his tale he declares, “Still I love it here” (346). The “here” that Henry romanticizes is located outside of the city

center in Flushing, Queens, the immigrants' borough where Henry once lived with his parents and where John Kwang once claimed a constituency. By comparison, John Kwang, the perceived *uber*-immigrant figure in *Native Speaker*, fails as city councilman and in his quest for mayoral candidacy, "brought down by the enormity of his vision, but also by his political opposition"<sup>36</sup> (Palumbo-Liu, *A/A* 318), and so is removed from the neoliberal sphere and relocated to Korea. As for Henry, his status at the end of novel is that of "long-term guest" or "[p]ermanently visiting" in his "American" wife's apartment (347), and he accepts both his own and John Kwang's alienation from political culture in the landscape of the neoliberal city. This bleak acceptance affirms the erosion of social practices and offers little or no hope for any acquisition of power or access in the future.

The path the narrative takes to arrive at this final state of alienation for Henry and Kwang is through a deliberate construction of a "model minority" Korean/American figure. This figure is erected through a juxtaposition of two characters: Henry's father and John Kwang. The "model minority" ceases to be an ideal when we see firsthand the demise of Kwang, whose failure is emblematic of the contradictions of that "model minority" designation. Moreover, Henry's father remains deeply unknown to Henry, which underscores the constructedness of the older man's character. What we the readers know of Henry's father is limited in that his character is deceased at the time of narration and so is only a reflection of the narrator's memory. We never even learn his first name.<sup>37</sup> Henry's father is merely

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<sup>36</sup> See David Palumbo-Liu (1999) for more discussion on not only the demise of John Kwang (319) but also on the novel's "ambiguous ending" (320).

<sup>37</sup> See Park and Wald for a discussion of "shadowy" female characters like the Ahjuhmah, who has no name. The scene in which Lelia, Henry's wife, gets upset over what she deems to be Henry and his

the narrator's construction of a "model minority" figure—an imagined Korean/American small business owner whose "life was all about money" (49).

The way in which Henry introduces his father, a green grocer, into the narrative is as the bequeather of a "legacy" of the "inalienable rights of the immigrant":

[Y]ou worked from before sunrise to the dead of night. You were never unkind in your dealings, but then you were not generous. Your family was your life, though you rarely saw them. You kept close handsome sums of cash in small denominations. You were steadily cornering the market in self-pride. You drove a Chevy and then a Caddy and then a Benz. You never missed a mortgage payment or a day of church. You prayed furiously until you wept. You considered the only unseen forces to be those of capitalism and the love of Jesus Christ. (47)

Henry narrates at this moment in a voice that shifts to second person. The repeated "You" functions to construct not only Henry's father through an almost accusatory direct address but also any (ostensibly Asian) immigrant through the intentionally vague antecedent for the pronoun "you." Using stereotypical elements of the "model minority myth" such as hard-working, cash-hoarding, and God-fearing, "you" simultaneously refers to his father specifically, to no one in particular, and to all immigrants. This address reveals Henry's view of how the green grocer figure falls short when Henry beholds the image of John Kwang. The figure of Kwang as the

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father's disregard for the Ahjuhmah, beginning with Henry's not knowing her first name, is an oft-selected episode for classroom discussion. It raises issues of gender, cultural disconnect, and accountability, about which many undergraduates have had much to say.

narrator's "necessary invention" (140) is the vehicle through which *Native Speaker* offers a critical evaluation of those supposedly "model" elements of Asian immigrant life listed above. In other words, through his construction of John Kwang, the narrator hopes that "model minority" glass ceilings will be shattered. The figure of Kwang promises to amass both material clout and political empowerment.

The critique of the figure of Henry's father leads us to adjudge material success ambiguously and, therefore, partially exposes the "myth" of the "model minority."<sup>38</sup> In actuality, Henry's father did not pull himself up by his own bootstraps. He had access to a lump sum of capital from the money pooled together by the members of a *ggeh* (loosely translated, a Korean community money club). However, this fact of narrative does not demonstrate that Henry's father is less than admirable than Kwang or that his life's achievements are tainted by a lie. Rather, I think the point to be made is how the American myth of self-determination becomes the immigrant's lore. The lore constructs a "model minority" stereotype through Henry's telling the story of his father, not by the actions of the father himself. As a way of tracking this construction, specifically in a context of Asian American racialization, I next discuss how the "model minority" has evolved into discourse.

The "model minority" genealogically can be traced back to the 1920s when scientific study began to evaluate race as a factor in human performance and thus in shaping modern society.<sup>39</sup> Most of the first half of the twentieth-century's scientific theories on race, however, were discredited due to their heavy reliance on quantitative study, which proved that calibration was not a salient method for measuring racial

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<sup>38</sup> See Song 91-92 where he discusses the lie behind Henry's father's "immigrant lore."

<sup>39</sup> See Palumbo-Liu Chapter 5 in *Asian/America* and Omi and Winant's seminal study *Racial Formations in the U.S.*

characteristics—or rather, that race simply cannot be measured. Still, arguments positing Asians as the “model minority” group in the U.S. continued into the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1966, William Petersen published an article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “Success Story, Japanese American Style,” which is said to contain the first printed occurrence and application of the term “model minority” to Asian Americans.<sup>40</sup> Petersen’s article emphasized high levels of socio-economic success for Japanese Americans and established Asian American purported success—especially in contrast to other minority groups’ supposed failure—as a topic that would be covered in significant depth in popular media.<sup>41</sup>

In political and academic discourse, the “model minority” myth continues to be debated. J. Phillippe Rushton’s *Race, Evolution and Behavior* (1995), for example, returns to formulaic analysis of brain size, intelligence, and genitalia in an attempt to advance theories on racial characteristics of whites, Asians, and blacks. The result is that “Rushton’s formula seeks to account for Asian success, but deploys the same analytic tools to contain that success” (Palumbo-Liu, *A/A* 154). Sucheng Chan’s *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (1991) presents specific historical and

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<sup>40</sup> An unofficial source claims Petersen’s article to be the first publication where the term appears in print. See <http://modelminority.com/printout72.html>. Still, the origins of the term as it applies to Asian Americans and racial discourse are murky. See also Palumbo-Liu for how this article supports his claim that the “group whose particular characterization defines the nature of both the [model minority] myth generated and its ideological functions, was Japanese American” (*A/A* 171).

<sup>41</sup> For example, *Newsweek* (“Asian Americans: ‘A Model Minority,’” 1982; “The Drive to Excel,” April 1984; “Why Asian Guys are On a Roll,” 2000), *The New Republic* (“America’s Greatest Success Story: The Triumph of Asian Americans,” July 1985), *Fortune* (“America’s Super Minority,” November 1986), *Time* (“The New Whiz Kids,” August 1987), and *Parade* (“Why They Excel,” 1990). Also, a book titled *Top of the Class: How Asian Parents Raise High Achievers - and How You Can Too* was published in November 2005 (Berkeley Trade). *Top of the Class* is written by two Korean/American sisters, Dr. Soo Kim Abboud and Jane Kim who claim, “The reason that Asian students outperform their peers in the classroom has nothing to do with how they are born and everything to do with how they are raised” (2). The book aims to be a “primer” for parents on how to instill the drive for academic excellence in their children using 17 “secrets” (which serve as chapter titles), such as Secret #16: “help your child view America as a great land of opportunity.”



social details of Asian Americans, and Timothy Fong's *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority* (1998, 2002 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) examines comparative ethnic groups to emphasize the complex diversity of Asian Americans. Studies that analyze U.S. Census data on Asian Americans also seek to challenge, in particular, quantitative generalizations of Asian American socioeconomic success and to call for critical reconsideration of data infusing the "model minority" myth.<sup>42</sup>

*Native Speaker's* publication and subsequent popular consumption signifies the resurgence of systematic economic and political conditions such as those managing neoliberalism that emphasize "model minority" constructions for Asian Americans. In the recent past, 1960s American exceptionalism fueled domestic and international proliferation of the "model minority" myth, especially as it pertained to Japanese Americans (i.e., to contain civil rights activism and to revitalize U.S. economic involvement in the Pacific Rim). 21<sup>st</sup> century neoliberalism relies upon revised narratives of "model minority" constructions—ones that recognize institutional racisms but that do not fully contend with them. *Native Speaker's* immense popularity attests to the predominance of a continued U.S. policy of containment with regards to social activism, particularly in light of how the novel closes on Henry and Kwang.

The fact that both the novel and the author have become so popular in mainstream culture suggests that a narrative of complex alienation for Korean/Americans is acceptable not only because it is contained between the covers of a novel but also because it advances the notion that racialized conflict and

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<sup>42</sup> See for example "Census Study Shows Severe Poverty Among New York City's Asian American Children," which states, "Nearly 1 in 4 Asian American children in New York City lives in poverty" (<http://www.aafny.org/pdf/pr20030610.pdf>).

grievance are isolated to the urban space—the neoliberal city. As Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant posit in their study of public spaces accessed by queers in New York City, political geography is mapped through the state’s zoning and policing of marginalized communities.<sup>43</sup> The politics of space for Korean/Americans are similarly underscored by the effect New York City has on the novel *Native Speaker* and vice versa.

With regards to New York City, Chang-rae Lee describes how part of writing *Native Speaker* “was really just my love letter to New York, because I missed New York so much” (Gotham Gazette). Lee began crafting the New York City space and culture of *Native Speaker* while in graduate school in Oregon. *Native Speaker* introduces us to its protagonist Henry Park, who was born in New York at the end of “a long plane ride from Seoul.” That New York City destination is configured by ethnic enclaves in Queens and Manhattan and flanked by suburban Ardsley. All of the characters in Lee’s novels move in and out of New York City, and therefore, the greater New York/tri-state metropolitan area, along similar routes that the author himself takes. Chang-rae Lee addresses his own relationship to New York political geography:

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<sup>43</sup> In terms of racialized spaces, the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings, where several minority communities were clashing in the same urban space, citizens claimed that their calls to 911 were ignored and that the L.A.P.D. allowed destruction of property and life to occur because the situation involved only people of color. Activists argue that if black, Latino, or Asian people were looting in a white district, the police would arrive in full force. See Dai-sil Kim-Gibson’s documentaries *Sa-I-Gu* and *Wet Sand*. In terms of queer space in New York City, Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant discuss the City Council’s zoning of “adult businesses,” especially those that cater to queers, which is essentially the state’s way of removing queer sexual culture from safe and public space and forcing queers to “travel to small, inaccessible, little-trafficked, badly lit areas, remote from public transportation and from any residences, mostly on the waterfront, where heterosexual porn users will be relocated and where the risk of violence will consequently be higher” (551). See “Sex in Public” (1998). Of the untrafficked waterfront area, they also assert, “The same areas are known to gay-bashers and other criminals. And they are disregarded by the police” (551 f.n. 9)

I'm not really a native New Yorker. We lived in Manhattan for a little bit, but I've always lived outside. I lived in Westchester. I live in New Jersey now. I'm probably going to be moving farther down the coast towards Princeton. So, I've always been a New Yorker in terms of arrival. I'm always someone seeing the city from outside, always coming and going. (Gotham Gazette)

In terms of how space figures into his construction of characters, Lee is “interested in people who find themselves in places, either of their choosing or not, and who are forced to decide how best to live there.” Lee describes this state of being as “[t]hat feeling of both citizenship and exile, of always being an expatriate—with all the attendant problems and complications and delight” (Garner). This theme of alienation—of idealized yet denied full-access to a thriving New York space—effectively works in conjunction with the construction of the “model minority.”

The theme of the contained “model minority” portrayed in characterizations of Korean/American failure or struggle particularly in spite of material advantages recurs in all three of Chang-rae Lee's novels. In *A Gesture Life*, well-to-do, well-respected Franklin “Doc” Hata finds selfhood, or “real personhood,” in a “harmonious relation between self and society” (72). He lives in upper-middle-class, suburban Bedley Run, New York, where “it seemed people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn't *unwelcome*” (3). Franklin's entire life is guided by his aim to be a dutiful, law-abiding citizen, yet as his doubts about his acceptance in Bedley Run betray, his life of following protocol proves to be unrewarding; he even goes as far to wonder, “[I]sn't this my long folly, my continuous failure?” (205). His life of

gestures does not guarantee him a harmonious relationship with society, and moreover, it causes him to fail hopelessly in his relationships with others.

For example, while his approach to raising his adopted daughter Sunny follows institutional dogma, the dominant ideology unravels through the narratives of Sunny and the “comfort woman” he calls “K.”<sup>44</sup> Through their unstable subject positions in terms of race, gender, nation, language, and class, the characters of “K” and Sunny reveal the incompatibility of Franklin’s constant desire for assimilation, as well as the impossibility of his wholesale assimilation. For example, Sunny is the beneficiary of a privileged childhood upbringing that she fails to live up to. Franklin’s wish for her childhood included studying, practicing the piano, and reading books (27). Having quit playing the piano, Sunny later sees the piano as a symbol of her complete failure to be the model student child: “I’ve failed doubly. First myself, and then my good poppa, who’s loved and respected by all” (31). Yet Franklin himself doubts the efficacy of assimilation to the core, and “K” and Sunny’s tragic experiences shed stark light on that possibility. “K’s” and Sunny’s origins are related through fragments of haunting Korean histories: “K,” “one of four unwanted daughters” (245), along with another unmarried sister is traded during World War II to the Korean military by their father in exchange for their brother’s exemption from the conscription. By comparison, Sunny is similarly abandoned, as she is an orphan, born most likely as a result of a “night’s wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl” (204). Their fragmented narratives are often juxtaposed and operational in

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<sup>44</sup> For critical analysis of the term “comfort woman,” see Chuh et al. 2003. In the context of Lee’s and Keller’s novels, “comfort woman” refers historically to Korean women conscripted into sexual service for the Japanese Imperial Army during the Japanese occupation of Korea before and during World War II. For insightful analysis of *A Gesture Life*, particularly of the figure of “K,” see Chuh *JAAS* 2003.

highlighting Franklin's self-awareness of his shortcomings and therefore the failure of "model minority" or assimilationist ontology.

Lee's third novel, *Aloft*, depicts protagonist Jerry Battle living comfortably on Long Island, New York. However, this protagonist is always discomforted by the memory of his Korean-born wife Daisy, an overdetermined, tragic, Korean immigrant figure because she only exists posthumously in the narrative, having committed suicide in the narrative's past.<sup>45</sup> Jerry's approach to coping with the loss of his wife, who was the mother of his two children, Jack and Theresa, and the rearing of those kids is avoidance, "that ready faculty of declining, my very worst strength" (285). Seeking his own comfort in piloting a Cessna above Long Island, Jerry soon realizes that his family's material comfort is in jeopardy due to Jack's mismanagement of the family business. Meanwhile, he also learns that Theresa, a literature professor, is engaged to be married to Korean/American writer Paul Pyun. This announcement, however, is burdened by the jarring news that Theresa is pregnant and diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, which she refuses to treat to protect the life of the unborn child. As I consider further in the next chapter, *Aloft's* elements of Korean/Americanness come in subtle forms, given that the narrative is delivered by Jerry, "an average white guy" (69). Nevertheless, the outcomes for the novel's Korean/American characters are uncertain or even tragic in spite of their patriarch's attempts to maintain a comfortable status quo for the family.

In similar fashion that *Native Speaker's* Henry is the inheritor of his Korean father's "legacy," *A Gesture Life's* Franklin and Sunny are challenged with the war-

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<sup>45</sup> The narration of Daisy is not unlike that of Henry's father; she is an immigrant figure characterized through the narrator's bias.

afflicted conditions of their undeniable Korean origins. “K” continues to haunt Franklin’s memory, and Sunny struggles with self-identity that tells her she is not wanted and that she belongs nowhere. *Aloft*’s Jerry, Jack, and Theresa are perpetually grieving the suicide of their Korean-born mother, as well as confronting the complex obstacles that face them in their present states of exile. Because the Battle family members have repressed their memories of Daisy, the narrative surfaces some of the guilt and blame that they have harbored individually and which they share relationally. Still, details of Daisy’s personal history and state of mental health remain elusive, making the fates of Jerry, Jack, Theresa—and Paul—difficult to understand, as they are not met with the same kinds of reckonings that Franklin and Sunny, or Henry and Kwang have. As such, read as part of a megatext, the novels of Chang-rae Lee portray complex psychologies of Korean/Americanness characterized by latent historical trauma, or *han* (which I discuss below), that is compounded by minority alienation.

The potential harm posed by widespread constructions and consumption of Korean/Americanness, like *Native Speaker*’s popularity and Chang-rae Lee’s authorship is their functioning as products of neoliberalism through the market-driven culture of the U.S. The removal of both Henry and John Kwang as agents from the social sphere—i.e., the political and economic realms of the neoliberal city—is the novel’s acceptance of the possibility that there may be no space in the current political culture for an agent of social justice or civic change. This conclusion may be precisely what the media would like to promote—that is, the enfranchised, educated, racial other contained—and it may in fact be the case that the “media, largely

consolidated through corporate power...reinforces the central neoliberal tenet that all problems are private rather than social in nature” (Giroux 9). Therefore, what I have posited thus far is that given the current crisis of neoliberalism, both the narrative of *Native Speaker* as well as the author’s popularity need to be critically examined as constructions of Korean/Americanness, tied historically to a context of Asian racialization and to technologies of the “model minority.” The dynamic interaction of these texts and sites with an archive of Korean/American nationalisms, which I discuss next, offer additional readings that can be used towards understanding those constructions more fully, especially in terms of historical contexts.

### **3) Korean/American Nationalisms: “Out here and over there”<sup>46</sup>**

A critical, transnational approach that actively articulates intertextual links among various texts and sites can prove how Korean/American narratives must contend further with “model minority” discourse and how—as applied to contemporary Korean/Americanness—the “model minority” is a fleeced construction in service of U.S. hegemony. So as to find a way to undermine its effects both in U.S. and global imaginative and social spaces, we should heed what Rachel Lee and Sau-ling Wong identify as a

careful negotiation between, on the one hand, U.S. coalitional politics based on the entity ‘people of color’ and, on the other, a post-1965 immigration bias that may be transforming Asian America’s population to one that is more technologically ‘jacked in’ and that

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<sup>46</sup> From David Eng’s title “Out Here and Over There” *Social Text* 15 (1997).

might conceive of itself more diasporically (...) than ‘panethnically’  
(...) (xvii)

The contemporary global shifts in ways of knowing and channels for accessing those knowledges through technology are critically important. While *Native Speaker* takes place in and around the city of New York, which bears particular importance for the construction of U.S. hegemonic space and national identity, the novel also implies that Korean/Americanness is a bi-national construction, occurring at once in the U.S. and in Korea.

Transnationalism is relevant to my formulation of a megatext because of the ways in which the intertextuality of “Korea” as a social text with other kinds of Korean/American texts registers in understandings of Korean/Americanness. In geopolitical terms, Korea can be considered a client state of the U.S., a relationship that provokes critique of the unequal, neocolonial relationship between Korea and the U.S. As Ji-Yeon Yuh has argued, we must recognize the possibility that “all of South Korea may be one huge camptown” (“Shadow” 28). Consideration of the phantasmatic dimension of “Korea” through a conceptual megatext sheds light on the kind of systemic critique needed to interrogate U.S. hegemony over Korea, which effects constructions of Korean/Americanness.<sup>47</sup> These constructions inform our understandings of Korean/Americanness as it is being produced, distributed and consumed through megatexts of literary and popular media texts.

The social and economic conditions governing the opened doors for Asian American immigrants in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century produced the narrative of

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<sup>47</sup> See discussion of Žižek’s phantasmatic dimension and “Korea” as a social text in Introduction, beginning on page 20.



the “model minority,” which, as I discussed above, was produced in news media to report on the high levels of success attained by Asian Americans in education and income due to strong family values and work ethic founded in Confucianism. Scholarship problematizing the narrative of Asian Americans as a “model minority” continues to be active today because of the ways in which a “model minority” construction pits Asian Americans against other minority groups as well as fails to account for the significant cohorts of Asian Americans who do not have access to those high levels of socio-economic success.

*Native Speaker* also complicates the role that Korean/Americans play as part of a “model minority” through its thematization of *han*, a Korean concept shaped by narratives of Korean nationalisms.<sup>48</sup> As a guiding theme in Korean/American historical narratives, *han* enables *Native Speaker* to tap into the marketable success of that “tearful Benjaminian history” (Song 86) of Korean/American immigrants and their families who struggle to succeed in the U.S. after leaving a divided, tortured Korean homeland. As a result, the publishing industry continues to produce and leverage Korean/American memoirs of struggle and/or overcoming struggle as well as tragic stories of “Korea” for mainstream consumption.<sup>49</sup>

The Korean philosophy of *han* loosely translates as the “sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression” (E. Kim “Home” 215). *Han* is useful for this project’s approach to reading Korean/American intertextuality if we

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<sup>48</sup> See Min Hyung Song for a discussion of *han* as he defines it to be shared historical trauma in *Native Speaker*.

<sup>49</sup> See footnote 9 above. The Korean film and television industry has also capitalized on the tragic aspects of narratives of Korea. *JSA* (by Park Chan-wook, 2000), *Shiri* (by Kang Je-gyu, 1999) and *Silmido* (by Kang Woo-suk, 2003) were three highly successful films that focused on the conflicted Korean nation alongside the passion of the Koreans as one people.

conceive of it as a Korean/American construction. Korean/American narratives reference *han* as a shared sense of struggle occurring at once between Korea and the U.S. through a megatext's archives of mutually informing histories. *Han* is historically relevant for the ways in which it has served as grounds for critiquing the South Korean state and U.S. involvement in Korea by the *minjung* or people's movement.<sup>50</sup> So, while the *minjung* movement relies upon a legacy of *han* in earlier forms of anti-imperialist (anti-Japanese) Korean nationalism, the contemporary context of U.S.-Korea relations has produced different forms of Korean nationalism as well as rearticulations of *han* based on recent historical crises. Helen Heran Jun identifies several contemporary, intersecting nodes of discourse relative to *han* as an analytic: "official South Korean nationalism, racialized U.S. nationalism, dissident or unofficial Korean nationalism (*minjung* nationalism) and Asian American nationalist discourse" (325). All of these coincide variously and inform the construction of Korean/Americanness that is crystallized in and around Lee and his work.

During the 1970s and 80s when *minjung* was at its height as a movement for laborers, *han* served as a cultural symbol of oppression behind which the working masses could unite. In present-day Korea, the impact of *minjung* ideology has uncertain effects. For instance, if the *minjung* movement's claims to *han* assert that "individuals belonging to a nation are interrelated and interconnected" (M. Kim 361), then such an assertion has potential to erase significant social differences for the sake

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<sup>50</sup> Helen Heran Jun defines *minjung* as a "broad umbrella term for a number of different groups and organizations (the labor movement, the student protest movement, left-wing intellectuals, and artists) that articulate various critical positions in relation to the authoritarian South Korean state and U.S. economic and/or cultural imperialism" (351).

of empowering the left-wing intellectual elite. Min-Jung Kim<sup>51</sup> reminds us how counterhegemonic movements may end up reinscribing hegemonic structures via misrepresentation of the masses:

In an attempt to confer onto the masses a discrete identity, multiple experiences are often unified; articulated as a collective body, individual lives and the actual realities of the *minjung* are often distorted and denied. Despite shared histories of oppression and deprivation, the concerns of individual members of the *minjung* may be incommensurate (366).

Moreover, translating *han* from history to fiction or transporting *han* from a Korean to a U.S. context is not as seamless as some argue. Chung-Hei Yun, for example, states that the “centrifugal force shaping the Korean American literary imagination is generated from the loss of homeland through Japanese annexation, the mutilation of the land when it was divided into North and South Korea following the liberation from Japan after WWII, the Korean War, and the post-1965 exodus” (81).<sup>52</sup> Yun’s statement misrepresents Korean/American literature only through official Korean nationalism and as stemming largely from those shared historical experiences.

Alternatively, Nancy Abelmann and John Lie study Korean/American diasporic community formations by critically considering Los Angeles—a “suburb of Seoul.” Their study highlights the uneven narratives of Korean/Americans through

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<sup>51</sup> It is merely a coincidence that the author’s name and the name of the people’s movement share homophones in the Korean language.

<sup>52</sup> Granted, the collection in which Yun’s essay appears was published some time ago in 1992; nonetheless, scholarship on Korean/American literature is not so prolific that the claim has been completely overwritten.

varied responses to the traumatic experience of the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings.<sup>53</sup> However, regardless of the divergent experiences, the uprisings form a chapter that “many Korean Americans have placed at least in part, in the annals of Korean history” (18). The “annals” can be considered a sub-archive within a larger Korean/American megatext, and the “chapter” on Los Angeles continues to be rewritten. Thus, referencing archives through a megatext helps avert the conflation of Korean and Korean/American nationalisms.

On one hand, Korean dissident nationalist discourse is formed in part by the purchase of anti-Americanism, which “terrorizes Korean Americans,” whereas Korean/American nationalist identity bases itself on a “distinctive appropriation of certain historical events in the homeland,” and this appropriation “risks obscuring actual social and political realities” (M. Kim 358). Such neglect of the material discontinuities of Korean and Korean/American nationalist movements, as Min-Jung Kim argues, distorts history and thereby creates antagonisms that undermine each movement’s efficacy. A genealogy of Korean and Korean/American nationalist movements archived through the formulation of megatexts can assist in the prevention of such erasures.

The developmental narrative of a Korean/American nationalist movement is a key element in the rewritable archive of a megatext precisely because of the tendency for Koreans and Korean/Americans to repeatedly draw connections to historical

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<sup>53</sup> In what they observe as Korean/Americans’ process of “positing ethnic or national portraiture as a reflection of the past,” Abelmann and Lie in fact discover that “shared national traits...seen as legacies of Korea’s historical fate...are often contradictory and vary enormously from one person to the next” (19). *East to America: Korean American Life Stories* edited by Elaine Kim and Eui-Young Lee, for example, publishes this diversity of experience and enormous variation across Korean/Americans just in the Los Angeles area.

memory, fate, or national character. As a result, the Korean/American imaginary, referencing the “Korean memory-scape” of being a divided nation along with the U.S. racial landscape of being caught between ethnic crossfire, can “move smoothly between a United States present and a Korean past” (Abelmann and Lie 19). Yet, as I would also like to emphasize here, we must be “mindful both of the transnational dimension of Korean Americans and of their irreducible diversity” (10). U.S. hegemony’s legacy of racism and oppression has as much impact on Korean/American subjects as the “Korean memory-scape” because of the ways in which Korean/American texts are simultaneously archived and rewritten.

One example of how *Native Speaker* draws from a discourse of Korean/American nationalism is the novel’s allusion to the L.A. Riots. In the novel, John Kwang gives a campaign speech in which he recalls two recent deaths in the community: Saranda Harlans, “a young black mother of two,” and Charles Kim, “a Korean-American college student” (151). In Los Angeles, a few weeks following the March 1991 beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers captured on video, Latasha Harlins, a black female customer, was shot and killed by a Korean merchant in Los Angeles.<sup>54</sup> On the second night of the riots, Edward Lee, a college student like the novel’s Charles Kim, was killed in crossfire between civilians and police.<sup>55</sup> The fact

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<sup>54</sup> See Neil Gotanda “People vs. Soon Ja Du” in *The House that Race Built* edited by Wahneema Lubiano. Gotanda discusses how and why the shooter, Soon Ja Du, received what was considered such a lenient sentence and implicitly argues that the trial was an injustice.

<sup>55</sup> The circumstances surrounding Edward Lee’s death are inconsistent across various Web sources and Min Hyoung Song’s essay. One Web source reports that Edward Lee and his friends were responding to a call for help by Korean/American shop owners from looters heard over a Korean radio broadcast. Another reports a less admirable series of events: “Lee, 18, a Korean-American living with his mom in the Wilshire District, was out with three friends when they got into a fight with another group of Koreans. Police responded to the gunfight and exchanged fire with both groups. Lee suffered two fatal hits to the chest as he sat in the front seat of a car. Someone in the rival group shot him. Detectives later learned the gun battle was a tragic mistake. Each group had been protecting Korean-owned stores

that the young black mother figure of Latasha Harlins/Saranda Harlans and Korean/American college student figure of Edward Lee/Charles Kim are at once real people and fictional characters, located in Los Angeles and fictionalized in New York, points to the unstable nature of a platform or portraiture that relies solely upon the past, however recent or however tragic.

This flexibility of past narratives, or “flexible knowledges,” is precisely what a megatextual approach incorporates through a consideration of both the archivability and rewritability of texts. The transferral of the homicide events from Los Angeles history to New York fiction therefore emphasizes how unstable or flexible the ideology of *han* is for Korean/American national identity and how malleable Korean/Americanness is in the contemporary U.S. imagination. The active processes embedded in these constructs of Korean/Americanness contribute to a larger Korean/American megatext’s dynamic properties.

The eventual dissolution of the Kwang campaign in *Native Speaker* is a narrative culmination of those unstable processes. John Kwang is the novel’s Korean/American city councilman whose campaign Henry is assigned to infiltrate. Kwang tries to relate his campaign rhetoric to points along a *han*-based timeline, which does not work because it is like an attempt to hit a moving target. In the public campaign speech, Kwang mourns the loss of two citizens, referenced above. As he delivers the speech to an “even mix” of Koreans, blacks, and Hispanics (Lee 149), Kwang implies that all of these groups share in their struggle to overcome such

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and mistook the other for looters. Police made an arrest; no charges filed.” See [http://www.lafire.com/famous\\_fires/920429\\_LA-Riots/LAWEEKLY-2002-0426/2002-0426\\_lawekly\\_TheLA53\\_Crogan.htm](http://www.lafire.com/famous_fires/920429_LA-Riots/LAWEEKLY-2002-0426/2002-0426_lawekly_TheLA53_Crogan.htm). Song’s essay, also in contrast, describes Edward Lee as a “college student inflamed to action by radio stories of past acts of Korean nationalism. He was accidentally shot by a Korean merchant while trying to protect his family’s store from rioters” (86).

disaster and thereby “become more aware of how they comprise a single people” (Song 81). In an effort to romanticize the Korean psyche both to garner Korean/American sympathy for and inspire solidarity with the black community, Kwang preaches to the audience, “Know that what we have in common, the sadness and the pain and injustice, will always be stronger than our differences” (153). However, as the narrative unfolds, Kwang’s platform dismantles because it never had a firm foothold. Community building, political empowerment, or social mobility based on a universalizing, shared sense of struggle in the novel proves to be a faulty model. Either the community is spread too thin across too many differences, or individual success supersedes group solidarity. Thus, elements of *han* and connections to shared trauma are fleeting.<sup>56</sup>

Lee’s use of the trope of the *ggeh*, or Korean money club, also demonstrates these unsustainable structures in that John Kwang’s flawed political vision relies on a multi-ethnic *ggeh* and Henry’s father withdraws from the Korean families-based *ggeh*.<sup>57</sup> The *ggeh* system is chiefly a group of immigrants’ method of pooling capital in order to start small businesses. The figure of the Korean storeowner is further constructed through Henry’s remembrance of his father, who “ran his stores with an iron attitude” (185) particularly towards black customers, which is triggered by Henry’s meeting another storeowner Mr. Baeh, who is discontent with and ultimately

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<sup>56</sup> Dai-sil Kim Gibson’s documentary *Wet Sand: Los Angeles Riots 10 Years Later* films a Korean/American woman who experienced the riots and its subsequent community activism. The woman describes the coalition as “wet sand” that, when packed together, can hold tightly but when dry, falls apart. Ten years later, she does not see the same strength of unity across communities in L.A. Perhaps the same might be said about some of the community and agency teamwork in New York City ten years after 9-11-2001.

<sup>57</sup> Min Hyung Song discusses in detail these causes of the dissolution of both small- and large-scale *ggeh* and their symbolic meanings for the failures of competing versions of diaspora in *Native Speaker*. See “A Diasporic Future?” pp. 91-94.

disrespectful of John Kwang. The incident between Mr. Baeh, a black customer named Henry, and John Kwang is largely implied and understood at different levels by all parties involved. The customer Henry complains of a malfunctioning watch that he purchased from Mr. Baeh. Mr. Baeh asserts his no refund policy and offers an exchange, claiming in Korean to Kwang that the watch was purchased several months prior. After some bickering back and forth between customer and storeowner, Kwang motions Baeh inside to speak privately. What is said between Kwang and Baeh is never revealed to Henry (either one) or to the reader. What follows instead is Henry's reflection of his father as an adversarial storekeeper in his interactions with customers and employees. The strongest statements Henry makes about his father describe the father's blanket view of blacks: "To him a black face meant inconvenience, or trouble, or the threat of death. He never met any blacks who measured up to his idea of decency; of course he'd never give a man like Henry half a chance. It was too risky. He personally knew several merchants who had been killed in their stores, all by blacks..." (186).

The juxtaposition of Henry's observations of his father and Mr. Baeh in their respective stores magnifies Mr. Baeh's disdain for the customer Henry. In addition, we can glean that Mr. Baeh's bitterness stems from Kwang's insistence that Baeh cater to the customer. Henry Park observes the subtle clues that reveal Baeh's reluctance to offer the customer a more expensive watch and a pair of earrings, both at no charge. Baeh's body language—he "nodded very slightly, in the barest bow" and then retreats inside the store, "shaking his head as he quickly hung handbags," which he periodically "banged hard against the plastic display grid" (187)—belie the



undisclosed details of the tension between Baeh and Kwang. Kwang's grim assessment of what transpires—"He knows what's good for us is good for him...He doesn't have to like it. Right now, he doesn't have any choice" (188)—suggests that Kwang pushed his political agenda of racial coalition onto Baeh, and moreover, that his faulty approach manufactures a shaky alliance. By forcing the idea of shared struggle and common experience onto members of his constituency who ostensibly detest one another and find nothing relatable whatsoever in the other, Kwang is trying to rush history. Kwang misappropriates *han* by projecting a fictive alliance between blacks and Koreans.

In this same incident, Henry observes another misapplication, that is, the "traditional Confucian structure of community, where in each village a prominent elder man heard the townspeople's grievances and arbitrated and ruled" (188). Henry narrates how Kwang and Baeh at once adhere to and disregard Confucian hierarchical values. The exchange between the two immigrants shows where Kwang revises Korean philosophy so that it serves his agenda, a moment revealing some revolutionary potential for the ways in which it references the archive of a Korean/American megatext. Yet Baeh's un-Confucian, public display of displeasure as well as Henry's critique are clear. Henry observes: "But respect is often altered or lost in translation. Here on 39<sup>th</sup> Avenue of old Queens, in this mixed lot of peoples, respect (and honor and kindness) is a matter of margins" (188). Confucian ideology becomes distorted by the influence of capitalism—a casualty of "translation" the narrator mourns.

Leading up to the whistle-blowing on the *ggeh* are the deaths of two city council employees, aide Eduardo Fermin and cleaning woman Helda caused by the office firebombing that Kwang himself later admits to ordering. In the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, Kwang remains silently grieving, and his refusal to make a public statement is his refusal, he says to Henry, to make a “statement about color.” Nobly sticking to his rainbow coalition strategy, Kwang does not give the media what they want; that is, he does not “shade his suspicion toward one party or another,” which would make the incident a “matter of race” (273-74). At the same time, extra funds from Kwang’s supporters, immigrants of many origins, come into campaign headquarters, “money for *Mr. Fermin*” (278, italics original). In essence, the tragic death of Eduardo provides an opportunity for an affirmation of *han*, the same way that the deaths of Saranda Harlans and Charles Kim are shared traumas, as losses that Kwang claims “we have to bear together” (150). This affirmation is also similar to the way in which Kwang expects Mr. Baeh to bear sacrifices for the greater good of the community.

The novel’s narration of these events calls attention to the need for repetition to validate *han*; the retelling serves to strengthen the bonds of its believers. At the same time, these narrative events function as a critique of neoliberal containment of racial conflicts. Kwang seeks to rally a social movement that empowers minority communities. However, this movement is limited because of its ground-up approach contained within urban, ethnic enclaves. Any steam gathered by the communities’ *ggeh* is eventually extinguished from the top-down powers-that-be. As the plot’s denouement reveals, Glimmer and Associates, the spy firm for whom Henry works,

ultimately controls the political economy. We are reminded of Dennis Hoagland, Henry's boss, who preached neoliberal capitalism from the start: "It doesn't matter how much you have. You can own every fucking Laundromat or falafel cart in New York, but someone is always bigger than you" (46). *Han* and its repeated articulation is all that remains for the ethnic communities.

### **Korean/American Scholarly Directions**

Contemporary ethnic studies scholarship has dealt with Korean/American political concerns largely through the lens of the 1992 Los Angeles uprisings. Scholar Elaine Kim defines the uprisings as a collective experience for Korean/Americans.<sup>58</sup> Kim elucidates her definition of *han* through her process of witnessing the riots. She admits having the "terrible thought...that we were, just as I had always suspected, a people destined to carry our *han* around with us wherever we went in the world," that it had "smuggled itself into the U.S. with our baggage" (216). Here Kim shares a conception of *han* as a hindrance, as if Korean immigrants did not have enough "baggage." And, on top of or in spite of those burdens, Kim surmises that the "initiation into becoming American...requires that Korean Americans take on this country's legacy of five centuries of racial violence and inequality" (220). This statement can be read intertextually with *Native Speaker* in this way: "For both Kwang and [Elaine] Kim, the historical trauma of the 1992 riots becomes the rationale for building a Korean American sense of collectivity, albeit one that remains

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<sup>58</sup> Also in this project's Introduction, see Elaine Kim's personal reflection and analysis, "Home is Where the Han Is: A Korean-American Perspective on the Los Angeles Upheavals," published in *Reading Rodney King: Reading Urban Uprising*, ed. Robert Gooding-Williams (1993).

open to coalition with others similarly traumatized by a tearful Benjaminian history” (Song 86).

With these competing views on the value of *han* or rationalizing shared struggle as a grounds for strategic alliance, how are we to understand Korean/Americanness in our efforts towards political movements? How can a conceptualization of a Korean/American megatext help us account for contradictions and contestatory articulations?

Elaine Kim speculates along this trajectory to suggest a revision of our understandings of *han*. The tragedies experienced in Los Angeles are not a result of *han* being carried with Koreans on their journeys of immigration. In other words, Los Angeles 1992 marks “not the curse of being Korean,” but the “initiation of becoming American,” the legacy of struggle that is “assumed immediately upon arrival” (Kim 220). Thus, Kim offers the possibility that *han* is not so much a continuation or carrying over of Korean thought but that a history of struggle is a condition that all Americans must acknowledge and in which they all must share the burden. I seek to refer to such a communal acknowledgement by conceptualizing a Korean/American megatext: when, where, and by whom these conditions for struggle are articulated and experienced and how past references may be accessed as dynamic occurrences.

To close for now on the matter of Chang-rae Lee’s popularity, in consideration of Lee’s author-function, “model minority” discourse, and nationalist movements to examine the novel and its material success, we may better apprehend the conditions for the author’s writing as they relate to his and our social worlds. Reading Chang-rae Lee as a figure alongside his novels forges a discourse about

Korean/American literature that accounts for the many occurrences of “lore” in a Korean/American megatext. Drawing from the discourses that Chang-rae Lee and *Native Speaker* reference, my discussion will now move from a consideration of a “writerly” writer to one who is a “marketable” writer. The following chapter considers the impact of identity politics in the commercial realms of literary fiction. I will next read and critique the commodification of author and work through the formulation of a megatext around author Don Lee and his work *Yellow*.

## Chapter 2: “Doubleness”: Don Lee’s *Yellow* and the Literary Marketplace

How can one account for the tremendous popularity of novels such as *The Woman Warrior*, *The Joy Luck Club*, *Typical American*, and *China Boy*, among others? Here I wish to look more closely at this specific “minority discourse,” and suggest one answer.

A critical reading of these texts, and of the way they are represented in press releases, author interviews, book jacket blurbs, newspaper reviews, and academic essays, discloses a common thematic. The most popular texts tend to be perceived as resolutions to a generalized “problem” of racial, ethnic, and gendered identities. Such perceptions deeply inform the contracting, marketing, and distribution of Asian American literature, which in turn influences the (re)production of representations of the successful formation of a particularly constructed Asian American subjectivity, as well as the institutionalization of these texts within academic and popular culture.... There is, therefore, a doubleness in Asian American literary texts, which serve as representatives of an eccentric “ethnic” literature as well as models of successful assimilation to the core. This double function oscillates between the persistence of a fetishized “ethnic dilemma” and a specifically achieved “healing.” (Palumbo-Liu, *A/A* 395-96).

David Palumbo-Liu here identifies a particular subjectivity that emerges as a result of the recurrent narration of “coming-into-health” in popular Asian American

literature. In my study, I seek to challenge the ways that Korean/American subject construction is “naturalized” through a lack of critical attention to the historical and political conditions informing that construction (396). As I have been arguing, I do so by illuminating the prevalence and recurrence of Korean/American narratives across various realms of production and consumption through a megatextual approach. Given the ways in which a formulaic narrative of the assimilated Asian American, or the “model minority” construction, has served and continues to function as a marketing tool for Asian American literature, I posit that Korean/American narratives, especially fiction and memoirs, are not only working in similar fashion but also via more advanced technologies.

This chapter connects to the previous chapter’s discussions on the mainstream reception of Korean/American authors and their narratives. It continues by arguing that, in the current economy of advanced capitalism, through the distribution and consumption of the narratives that the authors craft and the ones that are composed about them, Korean/Americanness becomes commodified. I elucidate that claim by accessing a megatext of Don Lee and his work *Yellow*, which locates and shows how Korean/American commodification occurs. The questions connecting the previous chapter to this one are: Where, how, and why read these occurrences in the current economy? I offer a megatextual approach to reading as a method to help us answer them.

I begin by situating the author’s approach to the publishing of Asian American literary fiction in terms of ethnic literary discourse broadly. Then, I connect that approach to a two-pronged discussion. The first part analyzes *Yellow*’s short story

sequence form in terms of genre and fiction studies. *Yellow*'s form can be understood as a particular way of packaging and thus marketing the text. The next part discusses the gendered and racialized content in *Yellow* through ethnic literary traditions or histories. The gender and racial themes informing some of the stories can also be critically considered as aspects of the text's accessibility and marketability. Lastly, I investigate a particular moment in mainstream media where Don Lee writes a review of one of his contemporaries, Chang-rae Lee, as a way of illuminating the need for megatexts to read Korean/Americanness. If author Don Lee is voicing opinions and concerns on how to read Korean/American fiction, then we should participate in that conversation as well.

On a conceptual level, or in terms of how we apprehend the text, *Yellow* can be read through a discursive archive that registers *Yellow* along with prior texts and discourses that inform the text's construction—that is, through the formulation of a broader Korean/American megatext. As a result, by introducing an archive referencing Don Lee and *Yellow*, the composition of archives in larger Korean/American megatext is changed. For the purposes of my arguments and up to this point of my project, I have identified a Korean/American megatext that is constituted by Chang-rae Lee archive and now a Don Lee archive, which include all of the texts and discourses that I have identified as being widely referenced by both. Because megatexts are subject to matters of digital access and archive, this project's formulation of megatexts is advanced situationally and conditionally. As described earlier, the slippery nature of this formulation is characteristic of the dynamic and at times fleeting ways in which information is distributed and received through current



technologies. So, what is identified as a megatext for this chapter may only function as such for the purposes of this discussion.

I examine Korean/American narratives in Don Lee's *Yellow* because of the text's form. *Yellow*'s constructedness starts with its very composition: a short story sequence assembled from previously published stories. In addition, the short story sequence of *Yellow* invites a megatextual reading approach, whereby we read the stories not only in terms of how they are constructed individually but also in terms of their impact on the collection as a whole and their connections to other texts and discourses. Generally, *Yellow* reaches out and into several discourses, such as conventional fiction studies, through its presentation of form and theme, and contemporary ethnic/literary studies, through its concerns with race and gender representations.

I also examine author Don Lee because he demonstrates the ways in which a Korean/American author participates in the megatextual construction of himself and his work. For example, Lee, like many artists, manages his own official Web site.<sup>59</sup> Through his presence on the Web and in the mainstream press, Don Lee becomes legible in mainstream culture as a kind of product himself. And in today's market, alongside popular second-generation immigrant narratives by Chang-rae Lee and others, Don Lee's stories of what he calls "post-immigration Asian identity" seem to be faring quite well. Don Lee identifies and explores this "post-immigrant" territory in his fiction writing, and his approach locates ethnic concerns in the background and

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<sup>59</sup> Much of the information on Don Lee used for this chapter was found on the author's official Web site, [www.don-lee.com](http://www.don-lee.com), which has links to interviews, reviews, and other press-related publications on Lee and/or his work.

more “universal” concerns in the foreground of his characters’ experiences. This approach contributes to the text’s consumption in mainstream arenas.

In this chapter, I examine a megatext of Don Lee and *Yellow* as formally and literarily constructing Korean/Americanness as a marketable product. I employ an intertextual reading of *Yellow* with other narratives and discourses in order to understand critically the text’s perceived function in literary culture as a montage of Asian Americanness that is palatable for mainstream consumption. At the same time, *Yellow* can be examined critically as an indicator of where Asian American arts and politics may be heading in contemporary culture—hence its “doubleness.” I sketch the conditions for *Yellow*’s marketability alongside contemporary debates over the politics of representation, which aim not only to combat the proliferation of stereotypes but also to interrogate who is representing what and/or whom.<sup>60</sup>

Foregrounding *Yellow* as an example, I continue with the argument that by registering the existence and operations of a Korean/American megatext in our practices of cultural critique, we then recognize its approach as a tool that can help us respond to the pressures of cultural authenticity and the related politics of representation.

As I have argued, Korean/Americanness has emerged and continues to emerge variously from cultural, social, and political texts in the contemporary moment. I

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<sup>60</sup> As mentioned in the Introduction, the AAAS/*Blu*’s *Hanging* controversy centered on debates over ethnic group representations in literature as well as in the scholarly organization. Asian Media Watch, which defines itself as a “grassroots non-profit organization” maintains a Web site that tracks “negative depictions of Asian American portrayal in the media and entertainment industry.” See <http://www.asianmediawatch.net>. Recent reports include several radio station broadcasts (stations NYC’s Hot 97 WQHT-FM, NJ 101.5/Millennium Radio Group, and 94.5 WRCZ-FM Albany, NY) wherein the radio hosts made offensive remarks about Asian Americans. Each of these broadcasts was met with group protests and in some cases, the firing of hosts and issuing of on-air, public apologies. Also included on the Web site is the highly publicized April 2004 issue of *Details* magazine that featured a one-page piece titled “Gay or Asian?” The editors claimed that the piece was intended to be a “humorous swipe at social stereotypes” while many members of the Asian American and queer communities took offense and responded with outrage and protest. See <http://www.asianmediawatch.net/details/index.html>.

posit a megatext as advancing a reading practice that considers texts as dynamically interacting with an archive of other texts and discourses in order to contend more fully with the politics of representation. Due to the always already blurring of “Life and Text”<sup>61</sup> or of subject and object of study, reading Korean/American narratives requires attention to specific historical, social, and cultural contexts and intertexts. This chapter’s discussions are guided by the following questions: Given that *Yellow* is packaged and read as a “complete portrait of contemporary Asian America,”<sup>62</sup> does it effectively enable us to attend to specific contexts? Is it guilty of promoting the historical erasures observed in earlier popular Asian American fiction?

In order to investigate possible answers to these questions, this chapter reads the intertextuality of *Yellow*. I seek to offer a critical consideration of the author and the discourse surrounding his work in order to interrogate the text’s “double function” stemming from the author’s professed interest in “two contradictory agendas.” One is “post-immigration Asian identity,” which, as defined above, shifts ethnic/racial sensibility to the background and focuses on “universal” human experiences. Another is essentially a form of minority politics, to which Lee takes a didactic approach in telling the stories of racialized experiences of Asian Americans (Rutten E4).

Don Lee, author of *Yellow* and *Country of Origin*, is identified as a “third-generation Korean American” whose boyhood and teen years were spent stationed in Seoul and Tokyo due to his father’s career as a U.S. Department of State employee. He attended UCLA followed by graduate school at Emerson College in Boston,

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<sup>61</sup> In Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft*, which I discuss later, Jerry Battle recites his literature scholar daughter’s jargon.

<sup>62</sup> *Los Angeles Times* blurb printed on the cover of *Yellow* (paperback edition).

which is where Lee now lives and works. After a few years of teaching writing courses at Emerson, Lee became full-time editor of its literary magazine, *Ploughshares*. In an interview for his follow-up novel, *Country of Origin*, Lee discusses his life experience as a “displaced” person and his sense of that displacement as an identity. He narrates as part of his personal lore the lack of a permanent home, furniture that had been in storage for 20 years, his ever-working father, and moving overseas. Lee incorporates his “displacement” into the novel through the figure of the “Army brat.”

Displacement is a common theme in Asian American writings, insofar as alienation, exile, and the quest for a sense of belonging or “at-homeness” have been prevalent modes of inquiry in literature by and about Asian Americans.<sup>63</sup> However, Lee’s *Yellow* differs from earlier Asian American fiction’s concerns with displacement. Younghill Kang’s *East Goes West* (1937), for example, illustrates the desires of immigrants “who want to find a place for themselves in American society” (E. Kim, *Asian* 32); Theresa Hakyung Cha’s *Dictée* (1982) foregrounds the fragmentation of the Korean subject in the face of colonial and neocolonial systems. Both of these texts, of course, represent displacement, but they do so with a certain historicity in mind that speaks to the process of immigration and the condition of being an immigrant. Even Chang-rae Lee’s *Native Speaker*, as was previously discussed, holds to an immigrant “legacy.” In contrast, *Yellow* addresses the displaced situations of the explicit non-immigrants, or for “post-immigration Asian

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<sup>63</sup> E.g. Younghill Kang, Carlos Bulosan, Joy Kogawa, Shawn Wong, and Meena Alexander. See also Sau-ling Wong’s *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993) and King-kok Cheung’s *Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa* (1993) for critical discussions of themes of displacement and mobility in Asian American literatures.

identity.” This condition serves as Lee’s platform for introducing contemporary material and creative concerns for Korean/American writings.

However, in aligning ethnic literature with the prefix “post-,” Asian Americanists have been careful to point out the potential for certain erasures, such as the fleecing of historical specificity mentioned above. The problematic usages of “postcolonial” and “postmodern” as aesthetic rubrics for reading Asian American literary texts have been summed up by Palumbo-Liu in this way: first, in equating ethnicity with postmodernity, scholars neglect the ways in which postmodernism has been constructed in the context of late capitalism and specific political economies (162); next, the term “postcolonial” is contradictorily articulated in rhetorical doubletalk, where claims of misrepresentation are issued at the same time that another set of representative characteristics are created (164-65). Both kinds of reading practices—aligning Asian American literature with either postmodernism or postcolonialism—create a discourse of ethnic literature that advances a “depoliticized aesthetic.”<sup>64</sup> This depoliticization ignores the specificities of locating Asian American literary studies in contemporary cultural politics and is a concern tied to my project’s address of the continued significance of a critical gap between theory and practice. This gap points to the risk of relegating material histories and specificities for the sake of advancing theoretical arguments and cultural critique, even if for political movements.

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<sup>64</sup> See David Palumbo-Liu’s essay “The Ethnic as ‘Post-’: Reading *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*” in *American Literary History* 7.1 (1995): 161-68 in which he critiques three essays published in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Temple UP, 1992). The three essays are David Leiwei Li’s “The Production of Chinese American Tradition: Displacing American Orientalist Discourse,” Craig Tapping’s “South Asia Writes North America: Prose Fictions and Autobiographies from the Indian Diaspora,” and Patricia Lin’s “Clashing Constructs of Reality: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Money: His Face Book* as Indigenous Ethnography.”

Don Lee's *Yellow* seems to locate itself in this way of the "post-," in a discourse of centrality without much reach into history. He claims that "post-immigration Asian identity" considers that "being Asian is not in the forefront of the person's mind." This is not to say that the text is wholly depoliticized or completely unaware of Asian American literary and social history. Lee states that he is interested in a certain kind of politics, one that "educate[s] people about the kind of prejudice Asian Americans face every day" (Rutten E4). Nonetheless, if we are to associate "post-immigrant" with a reading of *Yellow*, we must necessarily consider what has brought us to this alleged state of "post-." For instance, one must understand what the analytic of the "immigrant" is in order to arrive at an understanding of "post-immigrant." Such knowledge can be obtained by referencing the archives of a Korean/American megatext, constituted in part by prior texts and discourse on immigrants and immigration.<sup>65</sup>

Therefore, we must pay close attention to the material and political conditions that have produced "post-immigration Asian identity" in the contemporary U.S., mainstream literary imagination. The next section begins with an intertextual reading of *Yellow* with a more canonical text, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, in order to see what kinds of traditions and techniques *Yellow* references and/or rewrites as a way of tracking this production.

*Yellow*'s formal properties as a short story sequence are established through its use of particular conventions. For instance, *Yellow* follows the short story sequence model that includes the assemblage of recurring characters into one locale.

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<sup>65</sup> A primary reference is Lisa Lowe's *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Duke UP, 1996), which foregrounds the figure of the immigrant as an analytic.

*Yellow*'s characters are all connected to and at some point located in the fictional small town of Rosarita Bay, California. The text's form aligns it with established literary conventions and traditions and suggests the author's reliance upon or trust in those modes. *Yellow*'s setting in a small town alludes to and has often been compared to Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which is perhaps one of the most well-known and extensively discussed short story sequences in American literature.<sup>66</sup> Also following convention is Lee's construction of Rosarita Bay and the text's third person narrator as a member of that town. Both Rosarita Bay and the narrator become important figures through the related-tale nature of the text. This method of story-telling is similar to how the town Winesburg and its "seemingly sympathetic and non-overtly judgmental" narrator (Lindsay 79) are operational in Anderson's text.

These formal conventions in *Yellow* can also be related to Lee's relationship to his text and the production of it. Lee recalls, from his college study of literature, the influence of Anderson's *Winesburg* as well as James Joyce's *The Dubliners*, which prompted him to use the method of detailing the town as a way of creating unity among stories. Lee also describes how the publishers wanted the text packaged in this way so "they could always try to fool people into saying it's a quasi novel or that it has appeal for more than the literary fiction aficionados" (Birnbaum). This packaging underscores the text's "doubleness" by calling attention to the ways in which the text is operational for both the literature field and the publishing industry.

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<sup>66</sup> Toshio Mori's *Yokohama, California*, an important, earlier Asian American short story sequence, has also been compared to Anderson's text. See Gayle Sato's "(Self) Indulgent Listening: Reading Cultural Difference in *Yokohama, California*," *Japanese Journal of American Studies* 11 (2000): 129-46; and David Mayer's "Toshio Mori and Loneliness," *Nanzan Review of American Studies* 15 (1993): 20-32.

Moreover, he points out how the text is two products in one—a short story collection and/or a novel.

Furthermore, as an editor himself, Lee's relationship to his work and the production of it can be seen as conflicted, much like Anderson's relationship to the small town. In an essay on Anderson's life and work relating to the small town, Clarence Lindsay has remarked that while Anderson's commitment to the small town is the "source of his genius" (79), it is also "really the only place, aesthetically speaking, he could go" (85). For both authors, aesthetic sense manifests in their characters' and texts' physical and psychic locations.

For example, Lee's characters harbor the same sense of place that both Anderson and his characters have vis-à-vis the small town—that is, a relationship to time and place marked by the acceptance of one's material condition, or one's "self-conscious bracing" (85). Lee's text replicates the Andersonian tenet that the "small town was where the essential American drama, the imperious self's dissatisfaction with its circumstances and the related desire for escape was acted out most intensely" (85). Also in Andersonian fashion, Lee "keeps his heroes at home" because "it is there that the sense of limitations is so at odds with the self's hunger for grandness" (83). For example, the protagonist of *Yellow*'s "The Possible Husband," Duncan Roh, is a stay-at-home hero. An independently wealthy young bachelor, Duncan settles in Rosarita Bay because he discovers Rummy Creek, a secret surf spot that provides him with the spiritual and physical challenges he craves through big wave surfing. For Lee, this sense of place "at home" does not exist for him personally, as his sense of displacement (mentioned above) clearly attests. Yet, *Yellow* is able to



manufacture a small town and its characters' sense of that place from what literary traditions like Anderson's have already established in our cultural imagination.

The text's genealogy in canonical fiction, moreover, permeates its mainstream reception. We can observe additional ways in which it has been marketed and received, for *Yellow* is described on the official, author Web site as

a fresh, contemporary vision of what it means to be Asian in America, a post-immigrant examination of identity, race, and love. In this sophisticated and provocative collection, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Americans flirt across and within racial lines, and end up facing not only fears of being ethnically "yellow" but also the universal terrors of failure and abandonment. (www.don-lee.com)

In the press, Lee has been candid about how "Asian American" is a marketing angle for fiction, suggesting that if it were not for the "Asian American" classification, his work might not have found any commercial success.<sup>67</sup>

Yet, *Yellow* deals with this racialized labeling in interesting ways. The text seems self-aware of its own portraiture, which allows it to straddle the categories of "literary fiction" and "Asian American fiction." On one hand, the characters seem a bit contrived, with Asian names and/or family histories attached to the narrative seemingly as a matter more of descriptive detail rather than of interpretive consequence. Lee admits that in some of his stories, the protagonists were originally Caucasian characters but that he later revised them to be Asian American (Rutten E4). These revisions came about largely due to the fact that the stories comprising *Yellow*

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<sup>67</sup> From the *Washington Post* online live-chat with the author, 18 May 2001. (Accessible here [http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/01/authors\\_lee0518.htm](http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/01/authors_lee0518.htm) as of May 2006.)

were not conceived as connective or sequential. The end product in *Yellow* is in fact what short story expert Forrest Ingram would define as the “completed” text, or a collection generated in-process, usually after a couple of stories were already published and a connection established to form a sequence of stories (Kennedy ix).

Lee’s interesting discovery, once he made all of his characters Asian American, was that “they not only opened up for me, but I also understand more of why they had behaved as they did in the stories” (Rutten E4). The resulting collection may at times seem a bit forced, with the afterthoughts apparent and even “a few characters [that] seemed spawned from a thesis rather than the other way around.” Nevertheless, literary critics ultimately laud Lee’s ability to “write about ethnicity and not crowd readers with right thinking” (Blythe). Popular reception also appreciates Lee’s creation of “third or fourth generation Asian American characters [who] represent the new California, no longer boxed in by exoticized definitions” (*AsianWeek*) or Lee’s “triumph of the artful over the didactic” (Rutten E1). These elements of the text’s contemporary reception indicate how *Yellow* is in conversation with the politics of representation through the act of reading and the business of publishing. By reaching out to multiple audiences, *Yellow* taps into these various discourses. A megatextual approach to *Yellow* helps us to apprehend the multiple realms that converge in our reading and interpretation of *Yellow* and thus to decode our understandings of Korean/Americanness that register through those dynamically interacting sites.

The short story sequence of *Yellow* is an unfixed yet useful genre designation, for it invites the kind of reading practice that can best apprehend that interaction. The

short story sequence is a literary form that resists definition and shuttles between novel and short story genres. Unlike the conventional novel or memoir, the short story sequence of *Yellow* repeatedly changes the relationship between the reader and the text as the reader moves from one piece to the next. *Yellow* is opportune for intertextual reading largely because it is a collection of stories that create a linked series. The short story sequence serves as a structural guide for reading and thus implementing certain reading practices.

Debates over this form and its putatively intrinsic literary value have been ongoing in fiction studies, and at the root of these debates are vexing questions of definition. In twentieth-century fiction, high modernism offers some representative texts that might collectively move us towards defining the genre: Gertrude Stein's *Three Lives*, Joyce's *Dubliners*, and Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, for example. Yet, inquiring into the "poetics" of the short story sequence, J. Gerald Kennedy raises the following: "What features of arrangement and emphasis differentiate the sequence from a miscellaneous collection? What measure of coherence must a volume of stories possess to form a sequence? In the twentieth century, what distinguishes a connected set of stories from the multifaceted novel?" (vii).

As Lee suggests above, the distinctions between the two are what publishers may be evading in their goal for *Yellow* to be different things for many readers. The short story genre, therefore, serves double agendas: while it challenges conventions by considering the shifting nature of formal designation, it holds a place in the canon by its association with a significant number of texts. *Yellow*, as an exemplary short story sequence, has the double-function of challenging the mainstream literary

establishment, because it portrays unique narrative constructions of Asian Americanness, while at the same time that it submits in part to publisher demands and constraints.

Following various examples spanning the twentieth century, Kennedy reminds us how definitions of the short story collection as a form shift when we examine the varied principles of arrangement (e.g. thematic connections or recurring characters). Moreover, we should be reminded that not all collections “reflect a deliberate ordering of stories to produce a total effect; by their sheer heterogeneity, some betray more commercial than artistic impetus” (ix). The commercial influence has produced short story sequences since the bundling of magazine stories into single volumes by, for example, Poe, Gogol, Hawthorne, and Turgenev, became popular in the nineteenth century (viii). Contemporarily, the practice of configuring novels partly from previously published short stories as Amy Tan, Gish Jen, and Chang-rae Lee, for example, have done is also common. Also in print are examples of the “arranged” text, which consists of stories published as a complete collection after each had been published individually elsewhere. Again, Don Lee’s short stories were each published separately over the course of ten years and later woven together into a sequence. These kinds of presentations of short stories provide opportunities for multiple and overlapping marketing and distribution channels. Such processes stemming from advanced capitalism inform Korean/American cultural productions, and various players (author, reader, publisher, reviewer, etc.) simultaneously participate in them.

The simultaneity of the processes of marketing, distribution, and presentation of a text like *Yellow* enables the constant rewritability of the texts constituting the archives of a megatext that give meaning to Korean/Americanness. Such archives are rewritten when new texts, sites, or discourses interact with prior histories or genealogies. *Yellow*, as a text acting like a commodity in the constant exchange and flow of a capitalist economy, is itself constantly shifting in terms of value and meaning and therefore is apt to impact broader understandings of Korean/Americanness. We can even consider that all of *Yellow*'s stories rewrite each other, if we read them in linear sequence, each story as separate text.

Another way of reading the intertextuality in the sequence is through the stories' attention to a specific craft or skill. Each story has a sort of vocational or professional identity all its own—as against ethnic/racial identity and in addition to the town identity—due to a character's attention to detail and attempt at mastery in a craft or skill. Lee admits to doing an “extravagant amount of research” for his stories.<sup>68</sup> For example, “The Price of Eggs in China” describes the art of Japanese carpentry as well as the avid hobby of reading crime novels. “Voir Dire” delves into the ethical difficulties of a public defender's work, while “Widowers” offers nautical details from a fisherman turned charter boat captain. “The Lone Night Cantina” paints a vivid picture of the American West as it has been distilled through movies and country-western music. “Casual Water” includes the golfing career of a washed up PGA member, and “The Possible Husband,” mentioned above, follows the spiritual and meteorological ride of surfing. Some of the characters in the stories

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<sup>68</sup> This quotation comes from the Reading Group Guide's Question-and-Answer with Don Lee, featured at the back of the Norton paperback edition of *Yellow*.

have achieved a certain level of mastery at their work or task, their dedication stemming from almost tragic relationship failure that subsequently immersed them into solitary business. Other characters seem to fall short of mastery, perhaps due to their being less afraid to fail or unable to learn from their mistakes, or both.

However, read this way, *Yellow* offers little in the way of specifically “Korean” details, like those worked into Chang-rae Lee’s and Nora Okja Keller’s texts, or ones that can directly connect to historical or political concepts mapped out through the archives of a Korean/American megatext. Slight, almost inconsequential character elements arise, such as Marcella Ahn’s physique, one of the “Oriental hair poets” in “The Price of Eggs in China,” who is “thin and tall” but has “most of her height...in her torso, not her legs—typical of Koreans” (14). We also get to know certain characters through glimpses of their lives as the children of Korean immigrants, such as Duncan Roh, who grew up in Korea and Hawaii as an Army brat and speaks some fusion of household languages—Korean, pidgin, and English. For the most part, the details researched and written into all of the stories in the collection, are about the highly specific, masculine-charged crafts mentioned above—crafts that are not necessarily “Korean,” “American,” or “Korean/American” in nature. As reviewer Tim Rutten claims about the varied ethnicities of the collection’s characters, “Ethnicity is part of the background noise of their American lives, but so too are love, work, desire, sex, anxiety, success, failure, loneliness, and perplexity—often more influentially” (E1). Each of the stories in *Yellow* has its categorical detail-orientedness that serves as a vehicle for relating the throes of human relationships, which in turn gives these stories “universal” appeal. However, returning to analysis

of the text's form—the short story sequence, thematic detail, small town setting—we can still critically consider *Yellow* as interacting with and referencing contemporary discourses.

For example, though subtle, *Yellow* does weave elements of Korean/Americanness into several of its stories through characterization. Notable as a collective are the Kim characters—siblings Lily, Eugene, and Danny—who loosely anchor the text through their having grown up and either returning to or remaining in Rosarita Bay. Respectively, the stories “The Possible Husband,” “Domo Arigato,” and the novella “Yellow” have the most explicit portrayals of Korean/Americanness and what I will call the “Kim trilogy” for the purposes of my discussions in this chapter. These sibling stories are the last three in the collection and follow the characters' birth order: youngest/Lily/“The Possible Husband,” middle/Eugene/“Domo Arigato,” and eldest/Danny/“Yellow.” The Kim trilogy also lodges the collection and Korean/Americanness firmly in the California “every-town.” Rosarita Bay is a San Francisco Bay Area coastal town modeled after Half Moon Bay, and as Lee intended, “one of those small California places where Asians have been a part of the community for generations, pursuing normal American lives in normal American ways” (Rutten E1).

Given that California is one of the earliest and now most densely populated areas of Asian American settlement, *Yellow*'s locus of Rosarita Bay subtly aligns the text with the social history of Asian Americans without having to reference it explicitly. The setting of *Yellow* fulfills reader expectations, in that Asian American characters in a California small town is “normal” and understood as part of America's

landscape. The Kim trilogy, however, is not so reflective of generations of normalcy, insofar as the stories configure Korean/American “post-immigration Asian identity,” which is emblemized primarily by first-generation immigrants and their second-generation children.<sup>69</sup> We gather that the Kim parents met during the Korean War and came to Rosarita Bay in 1953 with the help of American missionaries. The Kims achieved a middle-class lifestyle through hard work and access to channels for some upward mobility (199-200). As for the Kim trilogy, these stories together provide the text with its racialized and gendered polemic, which comes safely at the end of the collection. The effect of the short story sequence is strategically managed here, with the earlier “non-didactic” stories easing the reader into more politically charged content.

Of all the small town, “post-immigrant” figures in the text, including the Kims, the majority are males who face immediate conflict, and they are characterized as creative, intelligent, sexual beings: “Solid professionals, they are usually good-looking, smart and mannerly but also a little baffled” (Blythe). The fact that the characters face universally understood conflicts (man vs. nature, man vs. man, man

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<sup>69</sup> From the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Program’s Curriculum Guide for “The Korean Americans: A Century of Experience”: “The landing of the S.S. Gaelic into Honolulu Harbor in January 13, 1903 marked the first wave of Korean immigration. The boat carried 120 men, women, and children, who made up the first significant group of Korean Americans. The majority would become low-wage laborers on Hawaii’s growing sugar plantations. Over the next few years, over 7,000 Korean immigrants – mostly men – arrived in Hawai’i to meet growing labor needs.

The second wave of Korean immigration began during the Korean War (1950-1953) when the brides of U.S. servicemen arrived in the United States, thanks to the War Brides Act of 1946. In 1952, the McCarran-Walter Act allowed Asians to immigrate in small numbers and eventually to become U.S. citizens. Skilled professionals and students were given preference. As a result of these two laws, Korean immigrants between 1951 and 1964 included war brides, war orphans available for adoption, and professional workers and students.

The largest wave of immigration from Korea – and the largest wave of immigration from all of Asia – began with the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965.” See [http://www.apa.si.edu/Apa\\_resources.htm](http://www.apa.si.edu/Apa_resources.htm).



vs. himself) and experience a full range of human emotions (love, fear, anger, joy) exemplifies the text's use of themes that are conventional in mainstream literary fiction and supports the text's appeal to more than just "literary fiction aficionados." For example, Dean Kaneshiro in "The Price of Eggs in China" acts out a typical noir detective story in his quest to get the girl. Attorney Hank Low Kwon in "Voir Dire" confronts the gray scale of justice. Emily Vieira and Alan Fujitani in "The Widowers" join each other in the battle against loneliness. And Annie Yung (the only heroine of the collection) deals with a mid-life crisis in "The Lone Night Cantina." These stories are all accessible and self-contained.

In addition, the text's emphasis on ethnic male masculinity, evidenced by several characters' hyperawareness or performance of it, can be considered as extending from a genealogy of narratives of black and Asian masculinities in literature.<sup>70</sup> Whether this genealogy is accessible to most readers is debatable. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the One City, One Book finalists—Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and James McBride's *The Color of Water*, each a narrative treating Asian and black masculinity, respectively—demonstrate that public reading group advocates are uncertain about the degree and level of access they want to grant to said narratives.<sup>71</sup> *Yellow*'s Danny and Eugene Kim are rather tragic characters, and their stories reflect these kinds of anxieties about access to public realms. Tormented by the complex, felt-powerlessness they experience and which they attribute to their

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<sup>70</sup> Of course black and Asian masculinities are not alone in contributing to a genealogy of ethnic masculinities in literature; however, this chapter's investigation is limited to a two-pronged comparison.

<sup>71</sup> As I discussed in Chapter 1, *Native Speaker* was picked up by the Princeton Reads program following the abandonment of the One Book, One City program. Interestingly, *The Color of Water* became the Princeton Reads program's 2006 selection.

racialized and gendered identities (Korean/American and male), these brothers may in fact serve as symbols of overdetermination. Their masculinities, defined by sexuality and social status, become complicated with their racial otherness.

Seeing themselves constantly sized up against whiteness, and fearing that they are fated always to come up short, Danny and Eugene are figural men of color, like literary tropes. For instance, their hyperawareness of race reminds us of characters in naturalist black fiction. These Korean/American male protagonists can be compared to those created by, for example, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, and Chester Himes<sup>72</sup> and interpretively draw upon established African American literary traditions. The insecurity and even paranoia that these characters possess point to a psychology of race that is historically rooted in minority fiction and criticism.<sup>73</sup> One could look to the polemical writings of James Baldwin or Frank Chin to find much work on racial identity in U.S. society. What these connections demonstrate are the ways in which African American literary traditions and social movements may be a context necessary to consider for conceiving of and understanding Korean/Americanness.

African American intertextuality has been theoretically employed prior to what I am discussing here. Claims to intertextuality both in pedagogy and through black feminist theory have been substantiated since the late 1970s.<sup>74</sup> Moreover, the

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<sup>72</sup> Their texts and protagonists, respectively, are: *Native Son's* Bigger Thomas, *Invisible Man's* unnamed protagonist, and *If He Hollers Let Him Go's* Bob Jones.

<sup>73</sup> For more on black masculinity, see, for example, Maurice Wallace's *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995* (Duke UP, 2002) or bell hooks' *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (Routledge, 2004).

<sup>74</sup> See *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory*, ed. Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, section on *African American Theory and Criticism, 1977 and After* by Theodore Mason, Jr. Numerous anthologies and critical collections referenced there discuss the genealogy of African American literary theory. For instance, Henry Louis Gates' *The Signifying Monkey* advances intertextuality as a method of reading and production for African American literature.

intersectionality<sup>75</sup> of blackness claimed and investigated through discourses of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and nation in contemporary social theory critically illuminates Don Lee's work, as I show here. The experiences of Korean/Americans and African Americans in the U.S. are considered an important site of intersectional inquiry for scholars, and this present study can advance that work.<sup>76</sup>

African American literary traditions, additionally, recall gender to the stand and remind us how race debates have been voiced through literature in specifically gendered ways. In that all of Don Lee's protagonists, except one, are Asian American male characters, the text contends with the dynamics of race and gender chiefly from the standpoint of Asian American masculinity. Similar to the effects of 1970s Asian American cultural nationalism, *Yellow's* address of Asian American masculinities serves to specify a political agenda in cultural politics as separate from the concerns of female subjectivities (which I discuss further in the next chapter). Therefore, situating *Yellow* in ethnic literary traditions reminds us of the rich body of work that has been identified as Asian American literature and that is in conversation with discursive histories of shaping what "American" and "becoming American" are through fiction.

For example, "Domo Arigato" expresses some of these gendered and racialized social concerns for literary fiction. It relates Eugene's story of his trip to see his college girlfriend in Japan almost 20 years after the visit because of the

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<sup>75</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, Bonnie Thornton Dill, and bell hooks for important scholarship on intersectionality, e.g. the structural impact of intersections of race, gender, and class, particularly for black feminism.

<sup>76</sup> Discussions of representations of a black-Korean dyad were made above in readings of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* and the Los Angeles riots. Many sociological and ethnographic studies can be consulted to consider experiences of and between black and Korean/American relations in the U.S.; however, this study is primarily interested in the relationships between texts and the realms of discourse in which they are constructed and consumed.

questions that remained unanswered for him (and us): Is it easier being with your own kind? How can we live as racialized beings with dignity and calm? Stanford University sweethearts Eugene Kim and Nikki Keliher had their post-baccalaureate years all mapped out; they would live together at UCLA in the fall, where Eugene would be starting medical school and Nikki the Ph.D. program in comparative literature. But the summer after graduation revealed that their plan was not meant to be. Nikki suddenly decided to spend the summer in Japan with her parents, “whom she often said she couldn’t stand” (182). Eugene allowed her these unpredictable contradictions, so he went to visit her and the parents Keliher for two weeks. Though he would later describe those two weeks as Nikki’s “trying to quell his libido with a forced march of tourism” (180), during his stay, Eugene simply rolled with the punches, especially from Brady Keliher, Nikki’s father. Nikki’s mother, Joanna, even thought Brady, the blueblood CIA agent stationed in Tokyo who towered over the Japanese both in size and power, a “grade-A asshole” who “manipulates people for a living” (193). We learn from the narrator that Eugene is basically humiliated by Nikki and her father. Similarly, Joanna’s view of young Eugene also exposes his naïveté, as Joanna functions strategically as the voice of harsh reality. She delivers the moral of the story—that we end up with whomever we end up with “because it’s practical.” And she bluntly provides an answer to the story’s initial query: “It’s easier with someone your own kind, you see? Believe me, you’ll thank me someday for telling you this” (193).

Eugene’s naïve refusal to believe Joanna becomes supplanted by cynicism, as the narrator gradually relates the thoughts of a matured yet still somewhat troubled

Eugene. The narrator mentions Eugene's lingering state of not knowing "whether race had anything to do with it" (194), but we also hear Eugene's implicit acknowledgement of racial barriers. His marrying and having four children with Janet McElroy, a bi-racial woman of black and Korean parentage, plays an interesting role in the story's psychology and polemic on race but is only briefly mentioned. Janet's personal history of growing up on Yongsan's Eighth Army Base in Seoul and in Mississippi, the child of a father who is a black sergeant and a mother who is a Korean national, is recited in one paragraph. We are told that "Janet and her family knew more about hardship than he ever would" (195), which belies Lee's own unwillingness to narrate this complex experience. The story's reluctance to delve further into the character of Janet and her relationship with Eugene and her family suggests that in order for it to serve Lee's "post-immigrant Asian identity" agenda, the story must suppress other ethnic American identities' experiences. Nevertheless, narratives presenting the complexities of racialization and racial dynamics for Korean/Americans like Lee's Janet McElroy have been circulating widely and multiply.<sup>77</sup>

For example, in the same vein as Keller's *Fox Girl* (which I discuss in the next chapter), Heinz Insu Fenkl's *Memories of My Ghost Brother* is a searing autobiography of Amerasian boyhood in and around a U.S. Army camptown in Korea. Fenkl's text more explicitly than Lee's references multi-racial historical

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<sup>77</sup> Present-day bi-racial figures include R&B artist Amerie and NFL Pittsburgh Steeler's player Hines Ward, who are of black and Korean parentage. Narratives, images, and news of them are disseminated on mainstream television networks. Both celebrities have Korean mothers and African American (military) fathers, and both Amerie and Ward are highly successful in their realms of expertise—the music industry and professional football, respectively. On Amerie, see the MTV Web site at <http://www.mtv.com/bands/az/amerie/bio.jhtml>. On Hines Ward, see his interview with Sports Illustrated/CNN at [http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2005/players/01/18/first\\_person0124/](http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2005/players/01/18/first_person0124/)

conditions in Korea and bi-racial identity construction.<sup>78</sup> Another example is Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, which may be more tentative like "Domo Arigato," as it characterizes Franklin Hata's adopted daughter Sunny at arm's length. Though Sunny's birth origins are replete with mystery and speculation, the reader still understands that she is racially mixed. She also has a child of her own, Thomas, whose birth father is African American.<sup>79</sup> Therefore, Don Lee's Janet, like most of the female characters in the *Yellow*, is underdeveloped and limited to an experiential identity. Janet is defined only by her bi-racial, militarized struggle, which may allow for Eugene to remain a hopeful character, thankful for his family and full life. His resignation about white society in the end, that "it didn't matter...what was really in their hearts" (195), gets taken up in "Yellow" by his brother Danny, to whom I will return momentarily.

The discourse around gendered racial agendas in minority writings can be traced to an archival literary history of black male authors as they were in tension with contemporaneous black women writers—the paper wars, for example, between Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston, and Ishmael Reed and Alice Walker.<sup>80</sup> The connections between those discursive debates and a similar one that arose in Asian

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<sup>78</sup> Fenkl uses the term "Amerasian" throughout to describe himself and the other boys he grew up with (children of Korean mothers and American servicemen). The white or black fathers were mostly absent from their lives, and some of the children only knew Korean as their first language. During the 1960s and on the cusp of the Vietnam War, Insu comes of age with death, poverty, and crime occurring in his daily life. In this text, Insu's and other characters' racialization and tragic experiences are clearly connected to the legacy of troubled U.S.-Korea relations.

<sup>79</sup> Franklin narrates of his initial disappointment with the adoption agency to learn that the child was not from a "hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family who had gone down on their luck": "But of course I was overhopeful and naïve, and should have known that he or she would likely be the product of a much less dignified circumstance, a night's wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl." Also, though mentioned only once in the novel, Franklin describes Sunny's uncertain, complex racialization: "Her hair, her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her" (Lee *Gesture* 204).

<sup>80</sup> I recognize that what I am calling "gendered racial agendas" in literature may not be limited to the purview of African American or Asian American authors only.

American literary history have been alluded to by literary scholars such as King-kok Cheung and Daniel Y. Kim. Cheung details the paper war between Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston and the accompanying discussion amongst other critics in her important essay “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?” (1990). This multiply-anthologized essay reviews the body of critical arguments and establishes Cheung’s own analyses of the theoretical crises in Asian American literary studies surrounding these debates by recalling the vociferously launched polemic of writer Frank Chin, who attacks Chinese American memoir writers in general and Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* in specific.<sup>81</sup> Cheung’s later scholarly work, *Articulate Silences* (1993), extends the scope of study to include other Asian American women writers and to consider comparisons with African American women writers and the similar gender discourses with which these writers contend.

Literary scholar Daniel Y. Kim has treated Frank Chin and Ralph Ellison comparatively to address what he identifies in their work as an expression of a “profound masculine rage at a racism they experience as feminizing” and a belief common to both of their writings that a “primary effect of racism is that it seeks to force men of color to occupy a subordinate position of power that is structurally analogous to the one conventionally occupied by women under patriarchy” (vii). Though Cheung and Kim have made compelling points that advance a discourse on comparative gender politics in ethnic literary study, a discussion of blackness as a context through which one conceives Korean/Americanness is as yet understudied.

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<sup>81</sup> According to Cheung, the conflicts center around two claims: first, in exercising too much poetic license, Kingston misrepresents Chinese and Chinese American culture; and second, in portraying intra-ethnic misogyny, Kingston betrays Chinese American masculinity.

Our critical readings have been less intertextual across a more rich and dynamic archive as that referenced by this concept of a megatext I am positing. For this reason, a popular text like *Yellow*, both despite and thanks to its “doubleness,” prompts us to consider additional varied texts and discourses towards more comprehensive and sophisticated understandings of Korean/Americanness and how it is constructed. Don Lee’s *Yellow* references an archive of literary traditions—both in canonical and ethnic fiction studies—in such a way that opens up the conversation and shifts the production of meaning to a level that may better keep pace with current technologies of reading and apprehending information.

The discussion that follows offers a close reading of the title story “Yellow,” which summarizes 20 years of Danny Kim’s life dictated by racism, or paranoia about racism’s permeation into every aspect of his being. The intertextuality of “Yellow” with African American fiction identifies the discourse of African American literary traditions in a Korean/American megatext. The novella “Yellow” is the most polemical of all the pieces in the collection, and, according to Lee, is a “kind of odyssey through the conventional prejudices that an Asian American of my generation might have encountered” (Rutten E4). In this way, Danny Kim is a psychological map of Asian American male identity, similar to the raw caricature of Wright’s black everyman, Bigger Thomas. As the novella opens with sexual and physical descriptions of Danny, it immediately establishes its focus on the visceral nature of race. What follows reads like a biography, not unlike James Weldon Johnson’s self-conscious *Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man*, for its protagonist’s relentless hyperawareness of his racialized self.



The narrator of “Yellow” gives us a multitude of Danny’s inner thoughts and questions, fears and confidences that lead Danny to engage in his own self-construction. As a teen, Danny trained for boxing six days a week, morning and night for two years in order to manipulate his body and groom his style and attitude; these were the key components of manhood as Danny saw them in Luis Portillo, his boxing coach. The raw physicality of his training, enhanced by discipline, camaraderie, and confidence, for Danny was compelled by “an act of will” (211). The narrator details each of Danny’s calculated moves: for example, how he started boxing because he was severely insecure about his physical appearance and social stature; or why he double-majored in English to avoid being lumped with the “hopelessly square” students in his closet major, mechanical engineering. Later in college, Danny’s adult mindset is affected by the Vietnam War and “yellow peril” of that era, which “heightened his desire to repudiate his Asian-ness” (220-21). Every action or reaction in Danny’s life is premeditated by fear of failure and stems from his view of himself as a racially inferior human being.

Notwithstanding his insecurities is Danny’s sexuality. The story begins with the recollection of a sexual encounter Danny has with a woman in graduate school, detailed by a description of his flawless physique, his unique facial features, and his arrogant grace. Then, the story flashes back, and we get to know Danny up to his sophomore year in college, when he first loses his virginity. During that experience, the no-strings-attached coed enjoyed herself immensely, and Danny was “left with pride, for performing well enough to satisfy her.” But, again, as a result of his tireless self-scrutiny, he thought that the fact that he had not come was “indicative of some

deficiency in his technique or, worse, in his anatomy. Overall, he felt cheated by the experience” (219-20). As another short piece by Don Lee, “Abercrombie & Fitch,” starkly portrays, the sexual stereotypes befalling Asian Americans are fueled internally as much as they are imposed externally.<sup>82</sup> Here, one cannot help but read Danny as a victim of his own bad press.

Throughout his adult life, Danny continues to be terrified of racism. The reckoning of one’s self as a racialized being is conventional to ethnic fiction and occurs in most of the African American novels referenced here. What W.E.B. DuBois identified as the “veil” behind which people of color live, Danny steps out from and declares himself “yellow,” as his first boxing opponent once chided. Danny’s self-realization takes place gradually, as we see him confronting his fears of his racialized place in the world throughout the 20-year time span of the narrative.

In sum, *Yellow*’s stories about Korean/American “post-immigrant” figures in a conventional form comprise a text that appeals to established sensibilities of the American literary imagination. The popularity and mainstream appeal of *Yellow*, like many other commercially successful Asian American literary works, is a source of anxiety for Asian American cultural politics, for it threatens to overwrite the legacy of social activism. Popular narratives have the potential to impose historical erasures.

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<sup>82</sup> See <http://www.failbetter.com/2004-1/LeeAbercrombie.htm> for the compact piece “Abercrombie & Fitch.” At once critical and affirming of racial and sexual stereotypes, the story begins, “It’s a problem. She only goes out with white guys, he only goes out with blondes. It’s the familiar case of Asians believing in their own bad press: they’re geeks with small weenies, they’re wallflowers with little mystery.” Another interesting note is the publication of African American studies scholar Dwight McBride’s *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays On Race and Sexuality* (NYU Press, 2005), which also uses the controversial clothing retailer in its title. From Publishers Weekly: “In this collection of 10 smart, provocative essays, McBride explores, from varying vantage points (interracial gay male porn; the essays of Cornel West; the racial implications of Ellen DeGeneres’s coming-out show; the way the hair and clothing guidelines for Abercrombie & Fitch employees ensure an almost all-white staff), the tenuous position of a clear, distinct, gay black male presence and voice in cultural discourse and argues for an end to the relative silence.”

However, similar to the ways in which Asian Americanists employed the racial category “Asian American” in productive ways for political empowerment and social justice, I argue that the conventional formulation of Korean/American literary representations achieved by *Yellow* is indicative of the author’s self-reflexive awareness of the politics of reading and publishing. If the author is a product of culture and the text a commodity, then *Yellow* does a fair job of grappling with the production of meaning among the complex systems and processes in motion. This kind of critically comprehensive approach to a text—one that incorporates the text’s form and content, the production of both author and text, and the discourses around the text—is exemplary of a megatextual approach to understanding the commodification of Korean/Americanness.

### **The Two Lees**

Contemporaneous with the production of *Yellow* and Don Lee is the making of “Chang-rae Lee,” a cultural phenomenon discussed earlier. Their occurring in the same moment gives way to comparison, overlap, and even intersections between the two authors. The construction of these two authors as marketable products speaks to the production of Korean/Americanness in popular culture. In fact, the two Lees intersect in a unique moment—Don Lee’s review of Chang-rae Lee’s *Aloft* for the *Boston Globe*.<sup>83</sup> This review reflects what I am positing as the concept of a megatext, by its inclusion of texts and discourses such as Chang-rae Lee’s novels, Chang-rae Lee’s authorship, Don Lee’s works, Don Lee’s authorship, and by its interaction with the production and consumption of Asian American literary fiction. In the review,

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<sup>83</sup> See *Boston Globe*, 7 March 2004, “Books” section, page H7.

Don Lee subtly reads himself and author Chang-rae Lee intertextually and therefore demonstrates how an author is active in the construction of Korean/Americanness beyond his own works of fiction.

Don Lee requested the review assignment, a fact that immediately establishes the intertextuality deeply underwriting these authors' interactions. In the article, Don Lee identifies Chang-rae Lee as the "most prominent Korean-American author in the country," at once commending and thanking Chang-rae Lee for breaking from the "tyranny of writing about cultural identity" and for encouraging other Asian American writers to "unshackle themselves from the limits of ethnic literature" (H7). Here, from the position of a fellow writer, Don Lee articulates a "depoliticized aesthetic," separating the act or art of writing from the politics therein. In addition, Don Lee criticizes those who might politicize the issue of the novel's white male protagonist, "namely, academic demagogues and various muckety-mucks of identity politics," in effect, privileging aesthetic over scholarly approaches. However, at the same time, besides offering artistic evaluation, the review rhetorically critiques the politics of reading and writing. Relating to his audience, Don Lee puts forth the position that *Aloft* should be read as quintessentially "American," for like Chang-rae Lee's other two novels, it is a portrait of a man "desperately wanting to belong to something larger than himself, to find the true meaning of citizenship and home." Don Lee's creation of a megatext of Chang-rae Lee's work brought together with an archive of Asian American literary traditions and debates may be seen as a critical practice of reading the novel *Aloft*. Don Lee implicitly and intertextually reads *Aloft* as dynamically interacting with other texts, sites, and discourses.

In the review, Don Lee also offers the assurance that *Aloft*'s white male protagonist offers equal depth of character that Chang-rae Lee's other Korean/American male protagonists possessed. In other words, the uneven and discontinuous assimilation for the "post-immigrant" suggested in *Native Speaker* and *A Gesture Life*—that is, the failures of John Kwang and Franklin Hata, and the post-ethnic utopias they had hoped for—are not so much failures but more "universal" conditions of human conflict. *Aloft*'s Jerry Battle is neither an immigrant nor ethnic figure, but regardless, he is still only human and cannot transcend the material tragedies that his family bears. However, by contrast, Don Lee's statements in the review suggest that Chang-rae Lee, a Korean/American male writer, "unfeters himself" from and, in a way, transcends the politics of representation that have limited ethnic fiction. Don Lee finds that a narrative by an ethnic writer that attends to the complexities of material and emotional challenges for all human beings, regardless of race, is a "courageous, revolutionary step." I would further say that Don Lee would like to be considered as one who may follow in those steps.

Don Lee claims that a white male protagonist in *Aloft* proves that Asian American fiction writers' have risen out of the "ethnic dilemma."<sup>84</sup> The review suggests that writers like Chang-rae Lee and by association, Don Lee, have achieved artistic and commercial success by shifting ethnic identity concerns to the background of their work's thematic content. This move, according to Don Lee, suggests that the authors themselves have achieved a sense of place or placement among national

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<sup>84</sup> A similar argument was made in a *Newsweek* article titled "Why Asian Guys Are on a Roll" by Esther Pan (21 Feb. 2000) in which the author suggests that the success of Asian American males in contemporary society is marked by the fact that white women are seeking them as partners, among other things. See <http://modelminority.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=110> for a reprint including letters to the editor and ensuing discussion.

culture. In brief, *Aloft* is a novel about life's challenges and the ways in which humans—here, some of whom are Korean/American and some are not—choose to deal with them. Ultimately, the conclusion of the novel depicts Jerry and his kin working to pull the pieces of their lives together in the aftermath of tragedy. Actually, most of the entire novel is about the characters' grieving and trying to recuperate, since we are introduced to them when they have already faced severe loss.

*Aloft* is a narrative of a group's self-healing, which in slightly varied form, was popularized in earlier Asian American narratives and "model minority" constructions. Palumbo-Liu discusses how "model minority" constructions signal the self's "identification with, and in, the hegemonic" (397). According to Don Lee, this process of identification is achieved, it seems, through creative freedom, artistic mastery, and commercial success. In pursuit of these goals, Don Lee suggests that the publishing industry should no longer be limited to producing immigrant narratives or ethnic experiential stories and that ethnic authors should likewise expand their oeuvres.

From the book review of *Aloft*, we can analyze Don Lee's ethos. He demonstrates the credibility of his writer/editor experience through his scrutiny of the novel's craft. Don Lee's position as an insider on the subject matter of the review can be gleaned from his career as editor of literary magazine *Ploughshares*, as an acclaimed author, and as a Korean/American male writer, just like Chang-rae Lee. But does this obvious fact that both Lees are Korean/American male writers really have any clout? The answer could be articulated in an abundance of ways: I offer a particular moment in Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker* for a thematic consideration of

their likeness. Henry Park's spying on John Kwang is "predicated on their similarity" (Palumbo-Liu 1999, 317), because Henry and his colleagues from Glimmer and Associates "engaged our own kind" (NS 16). Henry admits that he prefers to use his "own life as material for [his] alter identity" rather than "build up a whole other, nearly parallel legend" (NS 168). Don Lee's writing on Chang-rae Lee and *Aloft* is an act of engaging his own kind; as mentioned above, he requested the assignment. Furthermore, it is exemplary of how the process of interpretation circulates megatextually and of the ways in which the meanings produced are rewritable through multiple ways of access to the same "material."

In addition, as a mode of critique, this review can be considered an example of public intellectualism. This form of public intellectualism is different from the work of scholars like Elaine Kim or Frank Wu (whose work I discuss in the Introduction) because it is intensely self-reflexive, to the point of including the self in the critique. Don Lee is a Korean/American fiction writer who reviews another Korean/American fiction writer. In the process of doing so, he touches upon the demands of ethnic writers, which apply equally to him. Thus, he demonstrates the level of scrutiny to which self-reflexive methods can extend. Also, the review reaches out to a wide audience (*Boston Globe* readership), making it accessible to multiple readers. Finally, it points to a megatext of prior discourses and texts, including Chang-rae Lee's other novels, also widely accessed.

The review, therefore, reveals Don Lee's active participation in the dynamic construction and rewriting of a broader Korean/American megatext. From the discussions of his own work and this review, it is clear that Don Lee bears a

conflicted role vis-à-vis the marketing angle of Asian American literary fiction and the demands for authenticity and representation in Asian American political discourse, to which writers like he and Chang-rae Lee were/are obligated.

Palumbo-Liu's argument quoted at the beginning of this chapter focuses on model minority discourse's ascent through the social and economic practices tied to the production and marketing of Asian American literary texts. And Don Lee has affirmed those strategies for the publishing of his own work. At the same time, he offers the argument that ethnic writers should not submit to the constraints of ethnic pigeon-holing. This quandary is at the heart of an ethnic writer's mainstream popularity, and, as Don Lee exemplifies, it is important that the author himself engage with the discourses informing the construction of an author and the production of his text(s). This mode of engagement is exemplary of a Korean/American megatextual approach and the ways in which it aims to intervene in cultural politics.

Looking at these two writers together in this brief intertextual moment of a book review is an example of how megatexts are self-perpetuating. In the context of Asian American literary studies, there has been no shortage of controversies over both the shortcomings and significances of racial, ethnic, and/or gender representation. Conflicts involving Asian American literary texts have taken root and will continue to crop up in various arenas. Yet in the current moment, there may not be as much controversy, as Don Lee presumes, over Chang-rae Lee's white male protagonist in his latest novel, or about identity politics more generally in literary scholarship. What has happened to the angry Asian American left?<sup>85</sup> Is "Aiiieeee!"

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<sup>85</sup> One popular culture example of interest: Lela Lee's comic strip "angry little asian girl," an icon for many young Asian American women, has become "angry little girls," representing different faces and



no longer an effective battle cry to rally the voices of Asian American cultural politics?

Don Lee's work seems to be critically cognizant of shifts in cultural politics that compel such a question. His official author Web site engages the rhetoric of publishing (interviews, reviews, and images) in digital format. His Web-only piece "Abercrombie & Fitch," mentioned above, is a one-paragraph story that at once calls upon the retail industry, Asian American racial and gender stereotypes in literature and popular culture, and possibly, even an Asian American activism.<sup>86</sup> Don Lee's work registers simultaneously in public and private spheres through his constant interaction with the realms of art, commerce, and academia. As such, his author-function, or the concept of the author as a construction becomes complicated insofar as this author begins to construct himself through his participation in print media and Internet public realms of exchange—that is, Don Lee as editor of a literary magazine, as author with his own Web presence, and now as reviewer of another author's work.

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colors in the cartoons. Still, the political [www.angryasianman.com](http://www.angryasianman.com), [www.asianmediawatch.net](http://www.asianmediawatch.net), and [www.yellowworld.org](http://www.yellowworld.org) as well as the more tongue-in-cheek [www.bitterasianmen.com](http://www.bitterasianmen.com) are still thriving in their current forms.

<sup>86</sup> In April 2002, retail clothier Abercrombie & Fitch distributed a line of t-shirts that featured caricatured depictions of Asian figures with questionable slogans. One t-shirt's slogan read, "Wong Brothers Laundry Service -- Two Wongs Can Make It White" with cartooned images of two slant-eyed, smiling faces in rice paddy hats. See *San Francisco Chronicle* April 18, 2002, "Abercrombie & Fitch: Asian Americans rip retailer for stereotypes on T-shirts." Don Lee's story was published in the Spring 2004 issue of online literary magazine [failbetter.com](http://failbetter.com), so while one cannot prove a direct connection between the t-shirt controversy and the short story title, the clothier's name continues to be in national news and receiving bad press. In November 2004, A & F settled a class action law suit to pay \$40 million dollars to Latino, African American, Asian American and women applicants and employees who charged the company with discrimination. The settlement also required the company to institute a range of policies and programs to promote diversity among its workforce and to prevent discrimination based on race or gender. See official Web site for the suit <http://www.afjustice.com/>. The references are difficult to escape.

## Conclusion

Don Lee's brief characterization of Lily Kim as an "artist who generated a lot of critical acclaim but few sales" (167), because her work was perhaps too political for the art aficionados of Rosarita Bay, underscores the difficulty for Korean/American artists to reconcile the demands of politics, art, and commerce to which they may be beholden. In the story "The Possible Husband," the impetus for Lily's work, as she stated for an interview in the *Rosarita Bay Horizon*, was "largely political, a protest against the commodification of nature" (168). Yet despite "miss[ing] the message entirely," Duncan bought one of her pieces straight away for how "it viscerally and exactly conveyed his experience in the natural world" (168). This lingering irreconcilability between the production and consumption of art is particularly legible in the figure of the Korean/American female—as both in *Yellow's* Lily and in figural Korean/American women represented in manifold other texts.

Writer Sonya Chung has observed through Korean cinema "how filmmakers exploring provocative territory in history and society have not yet managed to do so through, or even incorporating, fully-realized female stories or characters." Attributing this unevenness not to the filmmakers themselves nor even to the obvious culprit in Korean society, Confucian patriarchy, Chung suggests that complex global shifts have resulted in "no one, including Korean women themselves, knowing quite what to do with female characters. If she had a voice, what would she say? If you gave her a story, desires, who would she be? What would she choose?" (25-26). Lily, in similar fashion of not knowing quite what to do with Duncan, relies on obstinacy, anger, and bitterness—especially towards men—making her character

almost a cliché of a postmodern female. Lily is but one of many women with whom Duncan involves himself, yet she is the one he ends up marrying. So if Duncan is no longer the “possible husband,” what of the “possible wife?” The following chapter poses some possible answers. My discussion now moves from the commodification of Korean/Americanness to the political and historical conditions producing figurations of Korean/American women. In the next chapter, I examine these figures through a megatext of Nora Okja Keller’s novels and an archive of texts and discourses that those novels actively reference.

### Chapter 3: “Dangerous Women”: Figures of Korean/American Womanhood in Narratives by Nora Okja Keller

“Being Korean” is ultimately not possible for the Korean American feminist, who must in some sense let go of Korea. At least she must let go of Korean state nationalism, which checks the baggage, looks at the papers, adjudging the appearances and “realities” of identity, and requires acceptance of female marginality and subordination. At the same time, she must defend herself against the material violence occasioned by racial and sexual discrimination and political and economic inequality in the U.S. and the psychic violence of both abjection and homogenization into conceptual invisibility by the U.S. racialized state. (E. Kim, “Dangerous Affinities” 2).

As the previous chapters demonstrate, texts that emphasize masculine constructions are being accessed with great frequency due to the ripe political, cultural, and economic conditions for the Korean/American male authors’ and narratives’ popularity. This chapter relies upon the premise that those conditions do not favor Korean/American feminist texts because they do not permit us to investigate the following question: What is it about the figure of the subjugated, sexualized Korean/American woman that allows it to stand as emblematic of the failures of U.S. imperialism? By framing the issue as a matter of access and archive, I seek to allow for more full exploration of this question. I hope to intervene in the sustenance of those conditions that preclude such an investigation.

This chapter makes efforts to locate the contours of the distinctions as well as to identify the processes that blur the boundaries between the representations and the actual lived experiences of Korean/American women, including but also beyond the figure of the “comfort woman.” Efforts to discern the illusiveness of social construction from the weight of material experience have been and will continue to be necessary practice in Asian American studies. In conjunction with those efforts, my formulation of a megatext around Nora Okja Keller’s novels aims to address the difficulty of discerning or the at times inability to discern narrative constructions of Korean/American female subjectivities from “real” Korean/American women’s lives. This chapter’s megatext departs from the previous megatexts’ focus on the popularity of narratives and authors in that it references a historical archive of unjust systems constructing Korean/Americanness. I investigate here how Korean/American womanhood is constructed by a “web of subordination,” to borrow from Bruce Cumings. This “web” and its injustices become apparent through a megatextual approach to reading Keller’s narratives and the archive they reference “about” Korean/American women.

My discussion will begin by referencing Theresa Hakyung Cha’s *Dictée* in order to acknowledge the important critical work and reading practice that have come out of and that relate to *Dictée* and that inform this study of Korean/American women’s texts. Next, I introduce Nora Okja Keller’s novels as examples of what I am calling “experiential narratives,” which are stories of Korean/American women’s experiences that, I argue, we should read using a megatextual approach. Then, I draw from interdisciplinarity to posit an intertextual reading of Keller’s first novel, *Comfort*

*Woman*, with Ramsay Liem's oral history. Expanding on a megatext's argument for converging discourses, I draw on neocolonial and feminist critiques of the figure of the "comfort woman" in Korean/American narratives. Lastly, I intertextually read the figures of the "camptown prostitute" in *Fox Girl* and various media texts in order to reach more fully into those multiple discourses that I identify here as circulating in a megatext.

This chapter uses a megatextual approach to reading narrative representations of Korean/American women as a way of apprehending the uneven and multiply occurring constructions of Korean/American womanhood across different kinds of texts. This approach to women's texts can be seen as stemming from the interstitial approach to reading advanced by earlier critical studies of Cha's *Dictée*. Heralded by Asian Americanist and feminist scholars, as Lisa Lowe has stated, *Dictée*

dramatizes the fact that the investigation of nonelite, popular activity requires not only a deviation from the well-documented, official account but also a transformation of historical understanding and a reevaluation of what is considered to be significant... Rather than provoking cynicism about the possibility of writing history, the challenge to representation signals the need for alternative projects of many kinds and suggests that the writing of *different* histories—of nonelites, of insurgencies, of women, from the "bottom up"—inevitably runs up against representation and linear narrative as problematic categories. (111-12).

By comparison, a megatext of various texts portraying Korean/American women seeks to function as an alternative project that examines how scholarly work, public discourse, and literary texts simultaneously and together construct a categorical notion of Korean/American women. Such an approach demands that we constantly interrogate those constructions and that we refuse to accept any one representation as authoritative or complete.

For many years, Cha's *Dictée* has functioned as an exemplary text for critically examining Korean/American immigrant subjectivities through postmodern elements such as the text's mixed media as well as its resistance to conventions of language and genre.<sup>87</sup> More specifically, *Dictée* aggressively contends with imperialist systems bearing upon Korean/American female subjectivities. At the same time, however, critics have commented on *Dictée*'s difficult accessibility—due to its non-linear composition in multiple languages, varied forms, and abstracted history.<sup>88</sup> For example, Lowe states that an investigation of *Dictée* “demands that we become literate in what may appear, through the lens of traditional representation, to be only confused, random or violent incidents” (111). Many of these same critics claim that the complex and challenging reading practice is part of the text's exigence and relevancy. Considering it as part of an archive of Korean/American cultural productions, I would agree that reading *Dictée* offers an important strategy for acquiring understandings of Korean/Americanness as it has emerged from histories and contexts of imperialism. However, because *Dictée* forces the reader into a

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<sup>87</sup> For the collection of critical essays on *Dictée*, see *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, Ed. Elaine Kim and Norma Alarcon, Berkeley: Third Woman Press, 1994.

<sup>88</sup> See Lowe and Kang.

subject position of alienation, the fact remains that the text is hard to read and, we can deduce, is accessed limitedly.

This chapter's megatextual approach to narrative representations of Korean/American women differs from the approach *Dictée* espouses because it challenges us to access and read more texts and then to read those texts in relation to each other. Reading the intertextuality of literary, scholarly, and media accounts through a megatext enables us to explore more fully the processes that construct Korean/American female bodies as victims. For example, scholarly projects on the figures of the "comfort woman" and the "camptown prostitute" are being critically advanced in terms of interdisciplinarity and global discourses.<sup>89</sup> As Korean/American feminist scholarship increases and political movements for Korean/American women's issues gain steam, we should continue to critique the overdetermined representations of Korean/American women using dynamic and self-reflexive methods.

However, despite the growing body of Korean/American feminist work, I raise *Dictée* because it exemplifies what I see as a lack of reasonable access to critical understandings of figures of Korean/American women. This chapter's intertextual reading of novels with other non-literary narrative forms aims to provide a megatextual understanding of how Korean/American womanhood is constructed.

This approach is tied to the project's method of reading across various textual realms

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<sup>89</sup> For important scholarship on "comfort women," see the contributing essays by Laura Hyun Yi Kang, Lisa Yoneyama, and Kandice Chuh in the *JAAS* issue mentioned above. See also *Positions: East Asian Cultures Critique* 5.1 (Spring 1997), a special issue titled, *The Comfort Women: Colonialism, War, and Sex*, edited by Chungmoo Choi.



and seeks to find more access points for both the apprehension and production of knowledge.

As Elaine Kim and Lisa Lowe identify, official state narratives are problematic for the ways in which they marginally or inadequately inscribe the Korean/American female into such a category. In this chapter, I read Keller's novels, *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl*, intertextually with both scholarly and media accounts of marginalized Korean/American women. I engage in this practice of reading a megatext of writings in order to confront, rather than accept, narrative representations "about" Korean/American women and thereby reevaluate "what is considered to be significant." Similar to the ways in which Kandice Chuh has thoughtfully advanced a critical practice for understanding growing U.S. and Asian Americanist interest in Korean "comfort women" alongside the increased emergence of representations of "comfort women" in literature,<sup>90</sup> this chapter investigates the conditions that enable the figure of the subjugated, sexualized Korean/American female to register in multiple realms. My megatextual approach to narrative representations of this figure will reveal how a pattern of victimhood forms. This pattern constructs Korean/American female bodies as emblematic of both the historical violence of U.S. imperialism and the contemporary failures of U.S. neocolonialism. The next section begins by locating Nora Okja Keller's novels in the various realms and discourses that participate in producing knowledge about Keller's texts.

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<sup>90</sup> See *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6.1 (February 2003), guest edited by Kandice Chuh. Chuh's introduction outlines the three essays contributing to the special issue on "comfort women," specifically, how they focus on "illuminating certain critical concerns as to the politics and ethics of representing and producing knowledge 'about' 'comfort women'" (2). Chuh frames how "this issue as a whole argues for understanding [U.S. and/or Asian Americanist] interest as driven by and deeply rooted in the non-equivalent and sometimes competing politics of modernity, empire, class and capitalism, and race, gender and sexuality, particularly as they articulate to law and governmental politics, and to academic discourse" (2).

## Experiential Narratives

Keller's second novel *Fox Girl* portrays the bleak and at times horrifying conditions of a U.S. military camptown in Korea. The novel is narrated by Hyun Jin, a teenage girl disowned by her family, whose best friend Sookie has already entered a life of prostitution, following in her mother's path. Lobetto, a neighborhood boy who is the son of a prostitute and a black American GI, becomes their pimp, as all three find themselves working the nightclubs of America Town in their struggles to survive. The narrative of *Fox Girl*, in the same manner as that of *Comfort Woman*, highlights the desperation and abjection of the colonized Korean female. As one reviewer observes: "The brutal candor and moving empathy that distinguished Keller's first novel about Korea, *Comfort Woman*, is again evident in this stark, disturbing portrait of that country's outcast children in the wake of the American occupation" (Zaleski).

The parallelism of each novel's harsh depiction of history is quite obviously marked. The portrayals of the Japanese occupation during World War II in *Comfort Woman* and the U.S. occupation following the Korean War in *Fox Girl* together imprint a legacy of imperialism. This legacy is narrated in *Comfort Woman* with shifts between past and present, which occur through switches between two narrators, Beccah and her mother Akiko. In contrast, third-person, linear narration relates the underlying imperial trauma in *Fox Girl*. Though an overall "stark, disturbing portrait," *Fox Girl* follows linear development of Hyun Jin's coming-of-age, unlike *Comfort Woman*'s circular development of its two narrators. The first novel focuses

on the past life of the mother and the present mother-daughter relationship while the second novel depicts the protagonist's maturation process through the acquisition of self-knowledge and a departure from her community.<sup>91</sup>

Keller's novels can be classified as what I am calling Korean/American women's experiential narratives: writings that tell the story of a lived experience, whether fiction or non-fiction, *for the sake of telling it*. Recognizing the problems with these kinds of narratives but identifying agency in the authors' acts of writing, Shari Stone-Mediatore argues for "responsible reading of stories of experience." She claims, "we must not reduce these either to empirical evidence or to mere rhetorical constructions, but we must attend to the ways they can help us to discern contradictions in our own experience and can thereby facilitate our own further oppositional speaking and writing" (131).<sup>92</sup> I echo those claims—that we must continue to identify and caution against essentialism and commodification—and add that we must be watchful of risks that emerge when a practitioner identifies (with) subjects.

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<sup>91</sup> This kind of revision on the traditional *bildungsroman*, or novel of development, is not uncommon in contemporary ethnic women's fiction. Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstone* and Lois-Ann Yamanaka's *Blu's Hanging* are similar examples of "stark portraits" framed by a protagonist's maturation.

<sup>92</sup> Feminist scholar Shari Stone-Mediatore discusses an approach to reading sophisticated narratives of marginalized women's experience. She situates her analyses among an overview of feminist epistemologies for stories of experience and identifies the limits of an empiricist approach, which claims that "through experience, we can gain access to a prediscursive reality," and the shortcomings of Joan Scott's poststructuralist approach, which claims that "our inquiry cannot go beyond discourse" (120). Stone-Mediatore then advances her approach through Chandra Mohanty's readings. Mohanty claims that "stories of experience have been vital for Third World feminist praxis" (123). Stone-Mediatore theorizes "experience-motivated discursive agency," citing that these stories of marginalized women include the work of remembering and re narrating experiences of resistance and then rearticulating those obscure memories in connection to a collective struggle (125). She concludes that "if we read a text as a creative response to globally situated, experienced tensions, then we confront it neither as a representation nor a fiction but as an invitation to reconsider the historical world from the perspective of that narrative" (129).

While the disclosure of injustices—of “shedding silence” or “making waves”<sup>93</sup>—has been and continues to be important for Asian American women’s writings, the endeavor to *give* voice to those silenced as an impetus for scholarship, activism, or artistic work raises concerns for Asian American studies cultural practice. I offer a megatextual approach to read these kinds of experiential narratives in dynamic relation to each other. This practice of reading seeks to challenge static constructions by creating a shifting archive where narratives reference and rewrite each other.

For example, *Fox Girl* is part of a broader social, historical, and political narrative—into which *Comfort Woman* can also be inserted— involving the long history of relations between the U.S. and Korea. Though a fictional account, *Fox Girl* nonetheless represents and reflects much of the lived experiences that scholarly and community activist discourses disclose on the red-light districts and prostitution in Korea, as well as the human trafficking and the migration of women from Korea to sites in the U.S.<sup>94</sup> Examples of scholarly work on the discourse of prostitution in Korea include Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus’ *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (1992); Katharine Moon’s *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations* (1997); and Ji-Yeon

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<sup>93</sup> The title of Janice Mirikitani’s collection of Asian American feminist poetry is *Shedding Silence*. The title of an anthology of Asian American women’s creative writings is *Making Waves*, which has a sequel, *Making More Waves*.

<sup>94</sup> South Korea’s human trafficking involves the movement of women both in and out of the country from and to other countries. Women from the Southeast Asia and Russia, for example, have been brought into Korea on entertainment visas to work in camptown bars perhaps to replenish the decline of Korean women sex workers who have moved out to the U.S. either through marriage to a serviceman or through other family connections that could provide a sponsored visa. See discussion later in this chapter referencing Macintyre and Yuh. U.S. State Department monitoring of international human trafficking formerly placed South Korea on the “watch list” of countries, but the Korean government made eradication efforts and so improved its record to “Tier 1.” See <http://english.chosun.com/w21data/html/news/200406/200406150043.html>.

Yuh's *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown* (2002). All of these studies examine the complex, transnational processes and personal/collective narratives that inform the women's experiences.

I read these studies alongside Keller's works of fiction and heed the "critical importance of approaching representations...precisely *as* representations—as discursive constructions and not as mirrors of the real" (Chuh, *JAAS* 9). This call for caution stems from the fact that *Fox Girl* poses the same problems of identification and representation that *Comfort Woman* presented for scholarly approaches and activist movements. In earlier critiques of Keller's *Comfort Woman*, scholars claimed the importance of "insistently bringing into the foreground distinction between 'comfort woman' as an epistemological/literary object, and the actual people who lived through the institutional violence that is part of the history underwriting the term" (*JAAS* 9). Extending from those important efforts for distinction, I am also calling for an emphasis on the relations and connections between the fictional narratives and other non-literary texts.

These connective blurrings between textual representations and lived experiences exist because both kinds of narratives draw from and are shaped by the same dominant colonial and imperial systems. Similar to how *Dictée* "resists the core values of aesthetic realism" and instead "dramatizes, in effect, an aesthetic of infidelity" (Lowe 130), a megatext also seeks to disrupt the authority of any one kind of text or a hierarchy of texts. Such an approach was advanced in this project's Introduction. This chapter follows then to read the intertextuality of writings by and "about" Korean/American women and to conceptualize a megatext specifically

around Keller's novels. I advance a practice of reading Keller's and other overlapping narratives that are dynamically and perhaps randomly producing meaning about Korean/American womanhood in various realms. As such, I offer a way to read critically and to better understand those texts and discourses that accrue to Korean/Americanness. This chapter's megatext references current discursive practices, and the next section draws upon methods of self-reflexivity and interdisciplinarity already circulating in Asian Americanist critiques.

Author Nora Okja Keller, for instance, is highly self-reflexive in her public statements about her writing. Keller speaks to the powerful effects of experiential narrative in writing her first novel, *Comfort Woman*. She admits, "I felt like the story chose me" (Interview Gardiner):

I hadn't heard the term before 1993, which is when I went to a symposium on human rights at the University of Hawai'i. A friend called to tell me about this woman coming from Korea, a comfort woman. The former comfort woman spoke through a translator about her experiences as a young girl when she was stolen by the Japanese army and forced into becoming a comfort woman, a sex slave. I couldn't believe that people didn't know about this, that we don't learn about this in history books, so I tried to get my friend to write an article about this. My friend turned it back on me and said, "You should write about this, you're Korean." (Interview Hong)

The novel *Comfort Woman* crystallizes the concerns and pressures of experiential narrative. Keller's act of writing the novel exemplifies the kind of

“representational undertaking” that Kang identifies. Many Korean/American women artists who produce work that contributes to a political critique of “comfort women” are motivated by their sense of a “strong ethnic affinity with Korean ‘comfort women’” (Kang 26). Keller’s acceptance of her friend’s call to action, “You write about it; you’re Korean,” is an instance of a Korean/American woman artist’s aligning herself with a shared identity in order to help bear the burden that former “comfort women” carry in their movement for reparations. Kang’s critical framing argues that these kinds of “representational endeavors,” rather than operating as instruments of essentialism, on the contrary “interrogate the prevailing terms of both identification and representation as well as any assumption that one organically flows into and secures the other” (27).

A megatext offers an approach to reading narratives like Keller’s that are also representational undertakings. Insofar as a megatextual approach enables us to engage the various processes that impel identity construction and to reach out and into multiple discourses, one such useful discourse for reading Korean/American womanhood is interdisciplinarity.

### **Interdisciplinarity**

As Lisa Lowe, Katie King and others have argued, interdisciplinarity is an important key for confronting institutional power systems and for understanding complex relationality.<sup>95</sup> Interdisciplinarity provides a useful framework for a megatext because of the methods that it promotes for reading contemporary, emergent

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<sup>95</sup> See, for example, Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts*, Chapter 2, “Canon, Institutionalization, Identity: Asian American Studies.”

cultural productions in new or unconventional discursive spaces. For this chapter's readings of narratives about Korean/American women, I find this approach of King's to interdisciplinarity particularly applicable:

...I now locate "writing technologies" as the broader historical and cross-cultural category into which "new technologies and media" fall as particular contemporary instances. The expansive meanings that both "writing" and "technologies" necessarily engage today register these rapidly changing historical interrelationships, and I call these complex processes of intra-action "writing technology ecologies." ("Uncommon Interdisciplines")

In terms of King's "writing technology ecologies," both the swift construction of megatexts along the high-speed information superhighway and an author's sense of writing as a representational endeavor can be understood as dynamically interacting process. These complex processes register shifts in meaning and changes in knowledge production.

As I have argued, the conceptualization of a Korean/American megatext relies upon the theoretical frameworks of intertextuality and self-reflexivity that operate in both literary and Asian American studies. This pairing aims to parallel the kind of cultural practice King engages in above for feminist studies on gender and technology. In order to address the relational nature of knowledge production and apprehension, King calls upon another term, "flexible knowledges," as a way of naming the kinds of work produced "across communities of practice." I collect such



flexible knowledges into a megatext here in order to illuminate the gendered construction of Korean/American identities.

As Bill Readings states with regards to the University, interdisciplinary programs “should not bind us to the institutional stakes that they involve.” Readings and Lowe, among others, warn against further or future institutionalization of interdisciplinary programs, for “they will be installed in order to replace clusters of disciplines” (39). To address this kind of “market consolidation” that institutionalized interdisciplinarity might enable, I read the intertextuality of texts from discourses that have not been frequently conceived as informing one another. Along with those who are immersed in “flexible knowledges,” I am “*willing and required* to become [a] beginner,” in the approaches of transnational, women’s, and Korea studies (to name a few). I hope to locate inquiry in the spaces between and among these discourses in pursuit of the possibilities for an interdisciplinary Korean/American studies.<sup>96</sup>

Given that *Comfort Woman*, *Fox Girl*, and various other texts with similar exigencies representing Korean/American women continue to be produced and to reference each other, interdisciplinary efforts to discern one scholarly, activist, or artistic agenda from another may continue to operate in murky, mediated ways. On one hand, Keller’s novels provide avenues towards investigation and potential social justice by way of telling untold stories—rendering the “silence broken.”<sup>97</sup> On

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<sup>96</sup> An example of an earlier interdisciplinary project on Korean/Americanness is the special double-issue volume of *Amerasia Journal* titled, “What Does It Mean to Be Korean Today?” (2003-2004). This text locates itself “at the frontiers of Korean American studies” (Leong xi). As a self-proclaimed, interdisciplinary journal, *Amerasia* covers “writing technologies” across multiple textual and discursive realms.

<sup>97</sup> The title of the documentary on “comfort women” by Dai-sil Kim-Gibson is *Silence Broken*.

another, the novels leave open the opportunity for reifying essentialist notions of identity by detailing experiences that are symbolic of or motivated by a “true story.”

I am here not overly concerned with whether the story is “true” or not; of greater significance is that the narratives are circulating in multiple realms and being read in varied discourses. Given that the operation of social movements will continue to blur boundaries between subjects and objects, histories and fictions, nationalism(s) and essentialism(s), a megatext’s approach to critical study aims to account for and archive these obfuscations. By doing so, a megatext emerges as a tool that can be used in conjunction with approaches like interdisciplinarity or public intellectualism to offer a more effective way of grappling with advanced technologies of writing and reading.<sup>98</sup> The next section applies these tools to an intertextual reading of Ramsay Liem’s oral history and Keller’s fiction.

### **Oral History and Keller’s *Comfort Woman***

Ramsay Liem’s essay, “History, Trauma, and Identity: The Legacy of the Korean War for Korean Americans,” discusses the findings of an ongoing oral history project in which he interviews first- and 1.5-generation Korean/Americans who lived through the war and then emigrated to the U.S. as well as second-generation children of immigrants. As the essay presents the concerns of the interviewed subjects, several themes resonate with those facing characters Akiko and Beccah in Keller’s *Comfort Woman*.

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<sup>98</sup> This kind of critical collaboration between a megatext and interdisciplinarity is similar to what I advanced earlier between a megatext and public intellectualism.

Intertextual reading of Liem's essay and the novel draws connections between fictive elements and historical or ethnographic evidence. An example of the relational nature of these narratives is the trope or development of the mother-daughter relationship seen in *Comfort Woman's* characterization of Akiko and Beccah and Liem's investigation of actual parent-child relationships.<sup>99</sup> Drawing together the intertextuality of Liem's essay, Keller's novel, and feminist discourse on Korean/American women, we see the disconnects and overlaps that simultaneously occur in the construction of Korean/American womanhood through narrative representations. The stories that are articulated through both the research findings of an ethnographer and the fiction written by an author have the potential to rewrite each other, as I discuss below.

Using oral history, Liem investigates the impact of the Korean War on Korean immigrants who have made their lives in the United States. The essay discusses how the connections between these immigrants' past experiences of surviving the war and their present lives are not known. Furthermore, the essay explores how silence or lack of family talk and public discourse about the war does not mean that these Koreans lack memory (115-16). Liem claims that the Korean War's misnomer as the "forgotten war" denies the war's "important influence on 'being' Korean American today," even for "younger Korean Americans who did not experience the conflict personally" (112-16).

Though circulating in different registers, the concerns Liem observes in his subjects are the same as those that literary critics interpret in Keller's novel. For

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<sup>99</sup> The trope of the mother-daughter relationship runs deeply in the body of Asian American literary criticism, with novels by Amy Tan, Gish Jen, Maxine Hong Kingston among the most frequently studied.

instance, Beccah's inability to comprehend her mother's traumatic history, as described above, requires her to employ a new "writing technology." As a result, she conducts a ceremony in which she listens to the tapes of her mother and then scrawls words and phrases on a bed sheet in an attempt to transcribe her mother's admissions.<sup>100</sup> Beccah takes a moment to consider her mother a subject of study (as some of Liem's interviewees do as well) through an aural process. As Beccah listens to her mother, so too does Liem listen to his subjects. Ultimately, an audience of readers may hear these stories, which implies that the processes of "remembering in order to move forward," or of voicing silenced stories, offers the occasion for social justice.<sup>101</sup> However, the articulation, apprehension, and critical comprehension of those silenced stories demands a more critical reading practice, given that these two textual moments are ostensibly producing the same meanings. As I show below, intertextual readings of Keller's *Comfort Woman* and Liem's essay respond to those demands.

In order to read the fragmented Korean colonial history that informs and constructs Keller's *Comfort Woman*, we can begin by examining its dual protagonists, Beccah and her mother Akiko. Their relationship is an important site that reveals some of the archival, colonial history that affects the production of Korean/Americanness, which is challenging for Beccah to reference. For example, though Beccah made attempts to "slip completely in the world her mother lived in"

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<sup>100</sup> Chang-rae Lee's Henry Park also listens to tapes—of his deceased son Mitt. The aural moments may not necessarily create knowledge for the listeners in either novel; rather, they provide some kind of ritual to mark a progressive step in their grieving processes.

<sup>101</sup> Chuh also comments on this process of re-membering past trauma in order to reconcile the present and future in both *Comfort Woman* and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, stating that "operational in *Comfort Woman* is the sense that by gaining possession of the past in the form of knowledge that becomes one's own, the present (self) may be liberated to move past the past" (*JAAS* 13). "Re-memory" is also an important analytic in the essays and fiction of Toni Morrison.

(86), the cassette that she finds after her mother's death indicates both that Akiko's past does not include Beccah and that it is not meant to be retold for her. Rather, Beccah is an overhearer of the re-remembering and a vehicle through which the ritual after death can be performed. She observes:

Not once did my mother sing my name. And though primarily in English, this tape was not for me, was addressed not to me but to her mother, a final description of her mother's death and feast. Faithful in performing the death anniversary chesa, my mother proved to be a dutiful and dependable daughter in a way she never was as a mother (192).

Furthermore, Beccah's exclusion from her mother's past is evinced by her own inclination to deny her mother's traumatic experiences as a "comfort woman." Beccah states, "I wanted to drown my mother's voice, wanted to reassure myself that these atrocities could not have been inflicted on her, that she was just a child when she claimed to be a comfort woman" (196). Beccah thus stands to participate in the denial of imperialism by detaching herself from history and wishing to deny her mother's role in that history. Beccah functions as an agent of American amnesia, demonstrated by her inability to identify with or even accept her mother's enslavement.

This deep lack of understanding reflects Liem's analysis of the psychology of young Korean Americans who "become increasingly distant from the lived trauma of this [Korean War] past" (120). Liem interviews a Korean/American war bride<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> A Korean/American "war bride" refers to a Korean woman who married an American serviceman while he was serving during the Korean War. Ji-Yeon Yuh contemporarily uses the term "military

named Ruth, who believes her daughter sees her as a person not “with lived history” but “as a cultural exemplar, someone whose complexity of personality and outlook is merely representative of a timeless Korean way of being.” Ruth’s perception of how her daughter sees her indicates that the daughter cannot access “critical aspects of Ruth’s pathway to motherhood and personhood” (121). In Keller’s novel, Akiko is partially responsible for this kind of inaccessibility due to her own forgetting or withholding of truths. For example, when Beccah was a young child, Akiko used fragments of the storyline from *The Sound of Music* to tell the story of how Akiko and her father met (32). Subsequently, Beccah imagined her father as a comforting angel who would “spirit her away to a home on the Mainland complete with plush carpet and a cocker spaniel pup.” She says, “My daddy, I knew, would save my mother and me, burning with his blue eyes the Korean ghosts and demons that fed off our lives” (2). She also envisioned her parents as newlyweds through another storyline, “looking into each other’s eyes, stunned with love, humming ‘Some Enchanted Evening,’ as their features melt into those of Liat’s and Lieutenant Joe Cable’s in South Pacific” (46).<sup>103</sup>

While Keller ultimately underwrites Beccah’s childhood fantasies with Akiko’s realities as well as with Beccah’s questioning of them and growing self-awareness, at the end of the novel, Beccah remains an unrealized, Korean/American female figure. She is still in Hawaii with only Auntie Reno remaining in her life, and

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bride” to refer to Korean women who married a U.S. Army soldier while he was stationed in Korea. Both kinds of “brides” eventually emigrate to the U.S. when their husbands’ tours are fulfilled.

<sup>103</sup> American television and movie influence on Asian American identity formation has been explored and discussed widely. For particular discussion of such for Hawaii, see critiques by Rob Wilson and Candace Fujikane. See also Jessica Hagedorn and Lois-Ann Yamanaka for artistic work thematizing adolescent self-image and popular/material culture as they are evaluated and expressed through a U.S.-based lens.

the disclosure of her own narrative is an untold story. Beccah is left with no cultural or language community with which to identify—her own voice devoid of the Pidgin English Auntie Reno and her schoolmates speak.<sup>104</sup> We can only associate Beccah with the narrative of Akiko. And thus, we must read Beccah as emblematic of the imperial violence enacted upon her mother and the “comfort women” who were formerly voiceless and without access to the language needed to decry the injustices.

By comparison, one of Liem’s subjects, Grace, a 1.5-generation Korean/American feminist, is also at a loss for how to articulate and thereby understand fully her mother’s trauma of living through a war. Grace, as Beccah does with the ceremonial transcription, writes a song to her mother out of her attempt to try to “understand this so it doesn’t disempower me” (125). Grace acknowledges the fact that though she did not experience the same trauma that her mother did, she is connected to her mother’s narrative of experience nonetheless. Her identity as a Korean/American woman is intimately tied to that of her mother.

Given the powerful ways in which memory and legacy mediate the impact of imperial trauma on subjects as well as on their progeny, we can look more closely at the characters of Akiko and Beccah for the intertextuality of their narratives with other discourses. This way of reading exemplifies a megatextual approach to Keller’s novels by reaching out to additional discourses to apprehend more fully the construction of Korean/American women’s identities. For instance, the novel constructs Akiko as an immigrant and former imperial subject who “retains precisely

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<sup>104</sup> Beccah’s status as a Hawaii local girl is unlike those of the characters in Lois-Ann Yamanaka’s Hawaii-set novels (Lovey and Jerry in *Wild Meat and the Bully Burgers* and Maisie in *Blu’s Hanging*). Yamanaka’s characters have mastery of a native “local” language, Hawaii Pidgin English, but they are disenfranchised for their inability or resistance to master the colonial language, Standard English.

the memories of imperialism that the U.S. nation seeks to forget” (Lowe 16-17). Akiko retains a complex history of imperialism, having been a Japanese colonial subject and having become a U.S. neocolonial subject (like Chang-rae Lee’s Franklin Hata). She is the ultimate liminal figure, caught in the way station of Hawaii between the mainland U.S. and Korea, shuttling between spirit and natural worlds, beckoned by women (spirits of Induk, her mother and sisters) but taken by men (the Japanese soldiers, the Reverend who marries her), alive but already dead. Beccah imagines her identity under the conditions of that liminality, as the product of a romance.

This “romance” can only be traced back to the colonial relationship between the U.S. and Korea. As has been proved extensively, U.S.-Korea relations continue to “reproduce already familiar gendered and sexualized relationships between the two countries” (Kim and Choi 4), both the symbolic gendered and sexualized metaphors of these relationships as well as the material, capital, and corporeal exchange in the economies of the relationships. Furthermore, Akiko and Beccah’s mother-daughter relationship, like that of Cha’s *Dictée*, is vexed by the troubled U.S.-Korea relationship and thus functions as both a metaphor for subject-homeland and a vehicle for a “retrospective mode of address—between postcolonial and colonial subject, between mother and daughter—which interrupts the unilateral dictation of the subject by the colonial state” (Lowe 139).

Both Cha’s *Dictée* and Keller’s *Comfort Woman* register how language functions as a key instrument of colonial oppression. *Dictée* employs the grammar school exercise of dictation as a means of critiquing colonial power over language. By comparison, Keller’s *Comfort Woman* depicts Beccah as a journalist for a local



newspaper. In this discursive vocation, Beccah is tasked with writing obituaries for the *Honolulu Star Bulletin*. Her daily work as a writer of past lives is a trope that accompanies her throughout the narrative.

When she must write her mother's obituary, Beccah admits that after six years she is lackluster at her job and records deaths formulaically. Though she used to apply creative talent to her writing (mostly to foster her May-December relationship with the paper's editor), she now writes obits with just the facts and statistics. However, even with such a template approach, Beccah finds that she does not have the facts "for even the most basic, skeletal obituary," nor does she even know "how to start imagining her [mother's] life" (26). Only when she begins the ritual of listening to her mother's voice on tape and writing down the words can she become a transcriber of her mother's multiple lives. Still, Beccah merely scribbles some words that she recognizes, separated from her mother's voice by linguistic, spiritual, and cultural differences, reminding us of the vexed nature of transcription, that, not unlike the function of dictation in *Dictée*, is occasioned by the demands of language that require the submission of the colonial subject.

Keller, as quoted above, incidentally sees herself in this role of transcriber as well, refashioning the testimony of Keum-ja Hwang, the former "comfort woman" whose story inspired the novel. Identifying this kind of exigency in women's fiction points to the tensions between the roles of the scholarly critic and the literary writer, which I investigated earlier through Foucault's theory of the author-function and ethnic studies' discourse on the public intellectual.<sup>105</sup> In alignment with that discussion, this chapter posits that reading Korean/American womanhood through a

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<sup>105</sup> See discussions in Chapter 1 on Foucault and in the Introduction on public intellectualism.

megatext—as an active archive of women’s writings and interdisciplinary approaches—helps us to inquire into the conflicts, overlaps, and possible sites of collaboration between the roles of scholars and artists.<sup>106</sup> One such site may be the shared agenda for scholars and artists to critique U.S. neocolonialism in Korea and the ways in which that history of power continues to construct Korean/Americanness.

### **Korean/American Critiques of U.S. Neocolonialism**

We may begin by reflecting on the ways the concept of diaspora has increasingly been used to analyze Asian Americanness. In projects investigating Korean/American diasporic formations, scholars, activists, and artists have observed that Koreans tend to oversimplify their connections to each other across region, generation, class, and experience. This tendency explains the ease with which connections between “comfort woman” testimonies, for example, and Korean women’s experiences are drawn. The discursive function of a Korean diaspora can be empowering indeed, especially given the visible minority communities of Korean/Americans in the racialized United States. Scholars Abelmann and Lie comment on the notion of ethno-national homogeneity: “In South Korea, notions that ‘Koreans are this or that’ are commonplace or popular and even political discourse; frequently these shared national traits are seen as legacies of Korea’s historical fate, especially colonialism and war” (19). The concept that Korean ethnic sameness

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<sup>106</sup> In her bold, interdisciplinary project, *Compositional Subjects: Enfiguring Asian/American Women*, Kang explores similar kinds of complications through what she terms “compositional struggles.” She effectively claims that the “dialogical exigencies” of Korean/American cultural productions call attention to the ways in which the works are “critically engaged with the pitfalls of the desire for representation and the will to knowledge” and how “[t]hey are critical re-memberings of identity and its possible composition” (216-17).

equals (un)official national and cultural identity along with the figuration of a Korean diaspora continue to be affirmed and contested as sites of political empowerment.<sup>107</sup>

A literary text that exemplifies a conscious Korean/American group designation, or a kind of literary Korean diaspora, is *Kōri: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Fiction*, edited by Walter K. Lew and Heinz Insu Fenkl.<sup>108</sup> *Kōri* not only posits a particular chronology for reading the collection, but it also makes an elusive claim with which all anthologies may contend, that is, that some identifiable “thematic strands...weave together the selections” (xii). The editors provide three reasons to support their argument that these strands are rooted in a diasporic Korean/Americanness: common “writerly origins,” which can be found in Korean culture’s “tradition of speaking for—or as—others” given the national history of oppression and trauma (xii-xiii); evidence of Korean cultural legacy—“specters of Korean tradition conveyed in tropes of displaced blood, culture, language, land, gender, and nation, sometimes poignantly when there is a threat of loss and alienation” (xiv); and, in response to the epochal shifts in Korea and the circumstances of Koreans in America, writers have “either resisted, accommodated, or taken advantage of the expectation that they produce images of Korean Americans that epitomize either irreparable foreignness or assimilation into a contented American life—both of which are forms of racial humiliation” (xv). Thus,

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<sup>107</sup> For example, the Korean American Research Center (KARC) in Los Angeles politicizes the consciousness of a Korean diaspora through its members’ reliance upon the recognition of Korean national identity outside of Korea. The KARC mission calls for a shedding of terms that carry with them the consciousness of “travelers abroad” or “people away from home” (*kyopo*) and instead advances an embracing of the term “brethren” (*tongp’o*), which “marks a symbolic call to identify with the diaspora community as an agent of political and social change” (Abelmann and Lie 25). Diasporic formations, as was mentioned in Chapter 1’s discussion of *Native Speaker*, are also operational in literature.

<sup>108</sup> Fenkl, mentioned also in Chapter 1, is author of the autobiographical novel *Memories of My Ghost Brother*.

Korean/American ethnic identification continues to operate for various social and political purposes, which are often contradictory.

Scholar Chungmoo Choi uses the term “colonial double discourse” to identify contradictions in the notion of a Korean consciousness. Choi claims that a complete “colonization of consciousness” for Koreans views the absence of Japanese colonial rule after 1945 as Korea’s liberation and the presence of the U.S. in Korea since then as a “gift.” Western cultural capital in Korea continues to have value through its association with modernization, elitism, and privilege in all aspects of Korean life (Choi, *positions* 79-83). Similarly, Ji-Yeon Yuh understands Korea’s colonial subjugation comparatively, with former colonizer Japan still as a potential oppressor, but the United States as an “ally and a friend who deserves thanks, whose freedoms and material abundance are ideals to be envied and pursued” (“Out” 20). In response to these hegemonic narratives, Choi critically examines the existing discourse of decolonization—namely *minjung* nationalism (discussed in Chapter 1)—and suggests revisions towards new subversive strategies.

However, the “postcolonial” counterculture movement in Korea, according to Choi, is an inadequate strategy for decolonization because of its reliance upon a model of national sovereignty and a lack of self-reflexivity. Choi argues that “self-reflective positionality rescues the colonized subject from the trap of being a victim, which often (and dangerously) slips into self-glorification” (79). In light of these kinds of investigations in various discourses, I ask, are texts like Keller’s novels, those that self-reflexively attend to Korean/American women’s victimization, in

danger of this kind of self-glorifying distortion? Furthermore, how far, exactly, has Korea come, if at all, towards understanding its own colonization of consciousness?

I would argue that even though the unofficial historical narrative of “Korea” now comes in many different print and digital forms, strategic revisions are not taking place quickly or broadly enough. Rather, hegemonic narratives are being carried forward in contemporary forms. For this reason I put forth the formulation of a megatext as an intervention, as a mode for strategically reading and rewriting prior texts and discourses in its archive. As a mode for Korean/American women’s studies, a megatext seeks to embrace some of these contradictions through a direct confrontation with both overlapping and distinctive narratives. In advancing such a practice for reading various narratives that construct Korean/American womanhood, I hope to further the investigations begun by Korean/American feminist scholarship, which I discuss next, as well as to make those critical understandings more accessible.

### **Korean/American Feminism**

Influenced by feminist studies for its critique of patriarchy’s role in nationalist movements, Korean/American feminist scholarship addresses the political operation of Korean/Americanity by arguing that Korean nationalism is not only masculinist in nature but also American in its mimicry of the colonizer’s forms. Therefore, the Korean nationalists’ agendas have always failed to live up to the idealistic modes of representation (of the masses) that they promote. As Elaine Kim remarks in the epigraph above, Korean nationalism and Korean feminism are mutually exclusive. In addition, as Chuh and Kang have argued with regards to the Americanization of

“comfort women” issues for Korean/American feminists, these U.S.-based intellectual, artistic, and community movements advocating for reparations must be understood as mediated efforts, and as mimicking colonial forms of privilege.

An example of a text that depicts a hegemonic construction of Korean/American womanhood is Elizabeth Kim’s *Ten Thousand Sorrows: The Extraordinary Journey of a Korean War Orphan*. This memoir advertises a “calling” similar to Keller’s. That is, the author uses writing as a means of confronting historical trauma. Keller and Kim both began writing in order to articulate a story that was previously silenced, and Kim extends that impetus towards a mode of healing. One reviewer describes Kim’s memoir as having the “raw urgency of a call to 911: it feels written for the author’s very survival” (Byrne). Like Keller, Kim wrote in the middle of the night, as if haunted by nightmares, both writers unable to sleep without purging the stories from their minds.

The story that Kim aims to purge is that of her traumatic life stemming from her mother’s tragic death. The memoir opens with Kim’s reflection of her mother’s “honor killing” at the hands of the mother’s father and brother.<sup>109</sup> Kim’s mother was allegedly hanged for a series of what were (are) deemed disgraceful acts in Korean Confucian society: she had an intimate relationship with an American serviceman resulting in the birth of a mixed-race child, and she then refused to sell the child into servitude. *Ten Thousand Sorrows* shares painful memories of an orphaned childhood, traumatic adoption, and abusive marriage for the sake of therapy, both the author’s and a larger collective, in the same way that many scholars and writers have

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<sup>109</sup> Kim’s use of this term has raised controversy for its ignorance of the complex, ancient practice of “honor killings” in Muslim countries.

discussed the disclosure of the unspeakable as a pathway to a reflection of a group's historical and social crisis.<sup>110</sup>

However, in light of some controversy that arose surrounding Kim's memoir, the value of the text's psychic, civic contributions is also in question. The memoir has been criticized for erroneous and misrepresentation of facts about the author's life. For example, Associated Press writer Hillel Italie writes, "Kim's memoir strongly suggests she was between five-and-a-half and 6 years old when adopted, but the author said in an interview with the Associated Press that she was probably a year and a half younger, making some events in the book more unlikely and her memories of Korea less reliable."

Both the author and publisher defend the memoir, citing the need to protect the author's privacy and the subjective nature of storytelling as explanations for possible blurred or omitted identifiers such as names, dates, and locations. Though the tendency to verify "facts" or to look for discrepancies in memoirs inevitably arises, memoir is a literary genre, not historical record. So, claims made in debates over accuracy or reliability should be taken with a grain of salt. Feminist epistemology sheds light on our understanding of such debates for its critical consideration of how "our experience lies to us" (Harding 287).<sup>111</sup> Memoir as a

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<sup>110</sup> For example, Kathleen Brogan extensively studies what she defines as "cultural hauntings," or ghosts, in order to highlight the ways in which ghost stories like Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Keller's *Comfort Woman*, and a catalog of others function "to re-create ethnic identity through an imaginative recuperation of the past and to press this new version of past into the service of the present" (4). Toni Morrison's *Beloved* foregrounds "re-memory," that is, the act of recalling, re-membering (literally and figuratively), and reliving the past as both penance for and liberation from grave, human injustices. "This was not a story to pass on," the novel's opening line, is a deliberate paradox; stories that were before kept in the closet, forgotten, or denied—those that were supposed to be quieted—are precisely the stories that need to be retold or even heard for the first time.

<sup>111</sup> Another popular memoir, James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*, has also been accused of containing discrepancies between the author's stories and public records such as police reports and court records.

source of history merely substantiates how history is a form of narrative and that an “experiencing subject encounters the world through ideologically conditioned lenses” (Stone-Mediatore 118). The Elizabeth Kim memoir controversy should remind us of the complexities that arise in representing Korean/American women in narrative form and again of the need for a megatextual approach to reading that both calls attention to and contends with those challenges.

For social movements, Kim’s *Ten Thousand Sorrows* has implications for a critique of the international adoption system and aspects of Korean society, but perhaps due to its questionability, the text has not been connected to such discourses. The memoir was initially recommended by adoptee advocacy groups, yet it has receded from acclaim because of the controversy over the credibility of its facts. In contrast, Keller’s *Comfort Woman*, as discussed above, divulges the past injustices enacted upon Korean “comfort women” and can be connected to a social movement for material reparations, which includes the demand for public acknowledgement of the crimes and apology from the Japanese government. These connections together demonstrate the need for different kinds of feminist discourses on literary texts to be put in conversation with each other. As I show next, Keller’s *Fox Girl* also has potential to highlight injustices enacted upon Korean/American women, for it can be read as a critique of U.S. military and Korean government policies on the camptown entertainment industry.

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The controversy was enhanced by the fact that Oprah Winfrey first praised the memoir with membership in her Book Club. She later publicly apologized for endorsing the book as well as publicly accused author Frey of misleading her and millions of readers.



### **Keller's *Fox Girl* and Camptown Prostitution**

In this section, I read the intertextuality of Keller's second novel with various texts depicting prostitution in Korea. My readings are guided by the following claim: Connections between fiction and social movements are not only emblematic of the failures of the U.S.-Korea colonial past but also evidence of a "self-reflexive positionality" that glorifies Korean/American women's bodies as victims of that failed past. To substantiate that claim, I explore this question: Is the "self-glorification" merely part of the present's technology of "healing"?

*Fox Girl* tells the stories of two Korean girlhood friends, Hyun Jin and Sookie, who both end up working as prostitutes, servicing American GIs in the camptown nightclubs. At first, the story, through Hyun Jin's narration, presents Hyun Jin and her family living in relative socio-economic stability versus Sookie and her single mother, a prostitute herself, the portraits of disgrace, dishonor, and poverty. Hyun Jin distinguishes her family's location in the fictional province of Chollak from others': "My mother's family, who had lived in Chollak generations before the start of World War II, owned the sweet shop we worked and lived in. We had an actual house—two rooms with an inside kitchen—not like the *piramin* shacks that the northerners or the GI girls from America Town lived in" (4).

Hyun Jin believes her family's lineage and property legitimates her existence in America Town as against the rest of the community. Furthermore, she attributes their sweet shop business with a certain service to the community, their best customers being the local school kids (5). Satisfying a kid's innocent sweet tooth composes the primary business. The fact that the shop sells American products like

Juicy Fruit gum and Coca-Cola that “only the Americans and their whores could afford” shows how their livelihood is susceptible to market forces, which are tied to the American military presence in Korea. The very presence of the Coca-Cola refrigerator in front of their store, for example, symbolizes not just Western capitalist influence in the Korean economy but also an entangled past. Sookie’s mother Duk Hee, one of these American GI whores, gave the Coca-Cola refrigerator to Hyun Jin’s father “because of the promises [they] made to one another before [the girls] were born” (6). The wartime secret eventually reveals itself—that Duk Hee is also Hyun Jin’s birth mother—and the horrifying chain of events subsequently spirals the narrative deep into a destitute world of poverty and prostitution in post-war Korea.

More explicit than the wartime past is the exploitive aftermath in which Hyun Jin, Sookie, and Lobetto parasitically and self-destructively coexist. Sookie leaves school, and Hyun Jin later finds her living with one of Duk Hee’s boyfriends. Sookie begins to open Hyun Jin’s eyes: “[Y]ou think Chazu is my first man?...I’ve been doing this since I was eight years old. One of Duk Hee’s boyfriends thought it would be fun to have me join them” (104). Then, just a young teenager, Hyun Jin learns from Sookie the truth about their mother, confronts her parents, and is forced to leave home. She turns to Sookie, who teaches her about “honeymooning,” which means to “do anything” sexual with a GI for money (131), and then to Lobetto, who employs her as his sex worker.

Hyun Jin’s body becomes Lobetto’s property as he puts her to sex work in the clubs and repeatedly rapes her. As a result, Hyun Jin becomes pregnant but then mysteriously miscarries. For her keep in Lobetto’s mother’s house, Hyun Jin decries,

“I paid with my child, my body, and my blood” (184). The narrative depicts Hyun Jin’s degeneration through a system of U.S. camptown prostitution.

The discourse of the “camptown prostitute” is treated as a field of inquiry by Sturdevant and Stoltzfus, Moon, and Yuh in their scholarly projects on U.S. militarized prostitution in Korea.<sup>112</sup> I focus on some of the scholarly work here along with Keller’s novel and other media texts. I argue that different kinds of narratives (scholarly, media, or literary) read as a megatext help locate the figure of the “camptown prostitute” more widely in realms of knowledge production. As such, we may better address militarized prostitution as an injustice and critique the systemic power relationship between Korea and the U.S. with broader impact.

In specific, I locate Keller’s *Fox Girl* as part of a megatext here that includes: Yuh’s book *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown* (mentioned above); Bruce Cuming’s essay “Silent But Deadly: Sexual Subordination in the U.S.-Korea Relationship”; Kevin Heldman’s exposé “Itaewon, South Korea: On the Town with the U.S. Military”; and Donald Macintyre’s news article “Base Instincts.” My interest in reading these varied texts together is to examine the geopolitical context in which *Fox Girl* has come onto the literary scene and to show how the narratives contradict, confirm, and/or rewrite each other. Intertextual reading of these different kinds of texts also aims to put varied discourses in conversation with each other. In this way, we are engaging with the “flexible knowledges” that contribute to and rewrite the archive of a megatext that animates Korean/American women’s representations and identities.

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<sup>112</sup> Another text that contributes to a discourse on camptown prostitution but that is not discussed here is Cynthia Enloe’s *Bananas, Beaches and Bases and The Morning After* (University of California Press, 1989, 2000).

Inasmuch as Bruce Cumings has referred to the U.S.'s role in modern Korean history as the "midwife of the Republic of Korea" ("Silent" 169), the U.S. military presence in Korea from the 1960s onward has also given birth to camptowns. Following Korea's liberation from Japan (the "gift from the allied forces," as Choi has called it), South Korea held unilateral presidential elections while under U.S. military rule, electing Syngman Rhee as its first president and declaring itself the Republic of Korea (Yuh xv). Therefore, it can be inferred that the U.S. "delivered" what has become the modern day Republic, which, during the 1960s and '70s, consisted primarily of Seoul and the outlying U.S. military camptowns.

Camptowns were produced by Korean and U.S. institutions of power and structures of subordination: "The U.S. military presence in South Korea has meant, for example, that whole towns have grown economically dependent on the local U.S. military base, their fortunes waxing and waning with the size of the troops (Yuh 21). Camptowns operate to serve the recreational and commercial needs of the U.S. military personnel stationed in Korea, and the primary labor force during that era of major development consisted of Korean women. A significant element of camptowns is the entertainment industry, which has historically employed female sex workers."<sup>113</sup> Keller's depiction of "America Town" in *Fox Girl* is a fictional mirror of this history of camptowns in Korea.

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<sup>113</sup> Katharine Moon situates her study of militarized prostitution, *Sex Among Allies*, in conversation with the pioneer work of Cynthia Enloe, who defined military prostitution as a "matter of international politics and national security" (11). Moon builds upon the work of feminist studies' critical exposure of the masculinist agenda that drives military ideology by calling for an understanding of social, economic, and political processes that fuel sexual relationships between American male GIs and Korean female prostitutes and a "specific intergovernmental context" (12) for the Republic of Korea and the United States.

Ji-Yeon Yuh provocatively has called camptown women “America’s comfort women” (14-19). Yuh argues that this comparison forces a recognition of the systemic subjugation of Korea under U.S. imperial power and shatters national identities of Korea as a sovereign nation and the U.S. as a benevolent ally (“Out” 20-21). Having conducted her research through extensive interviews, Yuh makes careful and thoughtful discussion of her “outsider-insider status” as an immigrant Korean woman allowed into the lives of Korean military brides or former camptown women who have formed small communities on the east coast of the United States.<sup>114</sup>

Because of the pathos embedded in this kind of ethnographic research, Yuh provides a narrative that “demonstrates how the most personal of relationships are deeply rooted in and shaped by historical and social circumstances” (7). In her introduction, Yuh shares the meta-narrative of her study:

Accustomed to contemptuous treatment from fellow Koreans, most women were unwilling to speak with me...

In general, however, they did want the world to know that they were people trying to live decent lives just like everybody else. This was their primary reason for allowing me into their lives, a generous and gracious act that could include the occasional coffee, the weekly

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<sup>114</sup> In a review of Yuh’s book, Seung Hye Suh heavily glorifies the book’s central focus on the women and their experiences: “In a virtuosic synthesis of scholarship from a wide range of disciplines and fields, Yuh frames the women’s daily struggles—in the public spaces of American life as well as within their own families—in a manner that neither simplifies the complexities nor loses its focus. The book also carefully walks the line between underscoring the difficulties the women face on the one hand, and, on the other, their strength, their resilience, and their creative agency. Yuh avoids treating the women as victims and features individual and collective efforts to create community and support. Finally, throughout it all, Yuh’s work never loses its commitment to make the experiences and voices of the women central. This historiographical project is grounded at every step in the experiences of the women whose lives, words, and perspectives constitute its core.” See *JAAS* 6.1.

encounter at church, invitations to association meetings and events, numerous extended conversations at their homes, and formal interviews (6).

Yuh's self-reflexivity speaks to the personal, individual nature of knowledge acquisition. Though she admits her experiential distance from her subjects above, Yuh also self-identifies as a Korean/American scholar invested in exposing a history of U.S.-Korea involvement for its "profound ramifications for American history, Asian history, and Asian American History." At the same time, Yuh suggests that once revealed, the intimate, personal levels of that involvement may serve both as sites of resistance to oppression within private/family spaces and as potential discursive acts towards transforming hegemony (7-8).

Yuh, like Keller, Elizabeth Kim and others, advances or "glorifies" the tragic, oppressed histories of Korean women in order to build awareness and instigate social change. While creating knowledge awareness is still an imperative of social activism, the ways in which those knowledges are produced and presented "about" Korean/American female bodies must be done with caution, given the overlaps of these kinds of narratives with each other. These overlaps have the potential to reinscribe the notion that Korean/American women are only/all victims.

An example of a cautionary and disapproving view of the camptown economy is Bruce Cumings' essay "Silent but Deadly," an op-ed piece originally published in the *New York Times* and later reprinted in Sturdevant and Stoltzfus. Cumings writes from his own experience. He lived in Korea as a Peace Corps worker in the 1960s and has been publishing scholarly research in Korea studies since the 1980s. In the

essay, Cumings calls militarized prostitution in Korea “the most important aspect of the whole relationship (between the United States and South Korea) and the primary memory of Korea for generations of young Americans who have served there.” He draws from his own diary as well as institutional memory, convincingly recounting the scene from multiple angles.

As a young married man teaching English at a Seoul junior high school in the 1960s, Cumings knows that he is seen by the average Korean as an American man “out ‘on the economy’... interested in ‘only one thing’” (170). At the same time, he observes the town of Uijongbu, located about one hour north of Seoul and the closest commercial district to several U.S. Army bases. He describes Korean camptown life with a judging and regretful eye towards the American men who patronize the “whoring district”: “Goofy-looking stupid soldiers walk arm-in-arm with whores who are often only young girls—very, very young girls. How do these men (?) justify this to themselves?” Additionally, Cumings senses the resentment that pulses through the town and feels that Koreans also view him with eyes that “glare at you with a hatred that can be measured” (171).

In this way, Cumings provides his personal account of the camptowns in Korea within the context of Japanese and American colonization. He calls the culture of camptown prostitution “a way of life” and “sex tourism [an] integral part of Korea’s subordination to Japanese and American interests through most of this century.” Of the Yongsan Garrison in Seoul’s Itaewon district, Cumings points out that “after all, [the base] was Japan’s for four decades, and now it has been ours for four decades... This patent subordination is obvious to anyone with eyes to see, or

ears to hear... the web of subordination is seamless” (174). Cumings’ critical observations continue to be echoed by journalists.<sup>115</sup>

Adding to Cumings’ critique is perhaps the most sensationalist piece of investigative reporting to be considered here, Kevin Heldman’s “Itaewon, South Korea: On the Town with the U.S. Military.” For the investigation, Heldman immersed himself in the military’s recreation in Itaewon, Seoul’s thriving camptown, which produced a highly detailed, graphic, magazine-length story.<sup>116</sup> At first, the piece was rejected by his home publication at the time, *Rolling Stone*. Then managing editor Robert Love recalls it being “not up to our standards.” But the story found a place for publication on the Web for a vast and continuing readership.<sup>117</sup> Heldman says that “Itaewon” has drawn “more reaction...than any piece he has ever written. He still hears...from G.I.s who read it” (Hoyt).

Perhaps because of the free speech zone that is the Internet and the lack of censorship from the *Korea Web Weekly* site editors who first published the article, “Itaewon” has a clear slant: the U.S. Army presence in Korea is a troubled institution. Heldman first focuses on the enlisted soldiers—who they are when they enlist and what they become once initiated—and the unmet promises offered to them by the military. Nowhere is this dysfunction more apparent than in surrounding

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<sup>115</sup> In addition to Cumings, Heldman, and Macintyre who are cited here, the *Korea Herald* has published several pieces critiquing the camptown industry.

<sup>116</sup> Heldman won a National Mental Health Association award for excellence in journalism for a piece titled “7 ½ days,” which exposed questionable practices at a psychiatric facility in Brooklyn, NY. For that piece, Heldman pretended to seek psychiatric treatment and was held in the facility for seven and-a-half days. His approach to journalism has been called “Full-immersion reporting on dark and significant subjects” (Hoyt).

<sup>117</sup> Heldman’s piece was originally published at <http://www.kimsoft.com/korea/us-army.htm>, Korea Web Weekly, which defines itself as an “independent, non-partisan, non-profit, and educational web on all things Korean: Her history, culture, economy, politics and military - since 1995.” The site has been known to tend towards an anti-American slant.



camptowns in Korea, where soldiers act out their disgruntled frustration, sometimes to the point of violence. “Itaewon” resurrects the stories that date back to Cumings’ time in Korea in the 1960s and gives them even fuller, more horrific description.

The article’s quotations from soldiers can be accredited to Heldman’s ability to move freely on and off post, though he had no official access. Heldman gained access to these stories simply based on his self-proclaimed role as a reporter trying to disclose the “truth.” The power of the soldiers’ narratives—of their willingness to tell their stories and Heldman’s ability to report them—dominates this piece. The context of military life is merely a backdrop, for the narrative always circles back to the victimization of Korean women. An example of this focus is Heldman’s detailed account of a night out in Itaewon with a U.S. Army Public Affairs officer ending with two Korean prostitutes in a hotel room.

The night out with the Public Affairs officer points to the article’s reliance upon and perhaps exploitation of narrative from many points of view. Heldman exposes the brazenness with which the Public Affairs officer spoke about his own behavior unbecoming an officer and the free-flow manner with which soldiers would speak about their disillusionment with the military and their own misconduct off-post. Other narrative details in the article include a “steady diet of incidents, seldom reported in the stateside press” involving violence, assault, rape, and murder of Korean women by American male soldiers, the worst of which includes an accompanying alleged crime scene photograph.

Ultimately, “Itaewon” accomplishes a grave exposure, not unlike that of the experiential narrative of the novel or memoir. Here, the intimate, ugly details of

camptown life resulting from the U.S. military presence in Korea are portrayed as pandemic. Chandra Mohanty reminds us that “the point is not just ‘to record’ one’s history of struggle, or consciousness, but how they are recorded; the way we read, receive, and disseminate such imaginative records is immensely significant” (qtd. in Stone-Mediatore 130). This chapter’s megatextual approach to reading, receiving, and disseminating recordings of Korean/American women’s experiences seeks to pay careful attention to those processes and to critically and self-reflexively interpret the meanings produced by engaging in those processes.

While Cumings, Yuh, and Heldman draw from a history of camptown subjugation of Korean women during the 1960s and ‘70s, which is the period that *Fox Girl* narrativizes, Donald Macintyre’s piece “Base Instincts” zooms in on a contemporary instance. Macintyre is *Time Asia*’s correspondent to Korea, and in this article, he surveys Tongduchon, a camptown outside of Camp Casey, home to the U.S. Army’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division and 20 kilometers from the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Based on interviews with people he meets at the various nightclubs in Tongduchon, Macintyre tells the pitiable story of a Filipina bar girl. Filipina and Russian women now staff Tongduchon’s red-light district establishments, and this piece demonstrates how a history of human trafficking for Korea, which began with the trafficking of Korean women to the U.S., has shifted. Where in the past era of *Fox Girl*, Hyun Jin and Sookie are trafficked from Korea to the U.S. through brokered deals involving a nightclub manager in Korea and that of a satellite club in Hawaii, Macintyre describes contemporary Tongduchon, Korea through the eyes of

Rosie Danan, one of at least 16 Filipina women who allegedly escaped horrific, forced work conditions.

Danan's story is not unlike elements in fiction that are readable, for example, in *Fox Girl* or Fenkl's *Memories of My Ghost Brother*. A young woman makes a deal with a middleman who provides her with immigration documents. Upon arrival in Korea, her papers are confiscated, and she is forced into sex work and the bar owner's custody. She hopes that one of her regulars might eventually buy her out of servitude and perhaps even marry her. Keller ends Sookie's story in *Fox Girl* by keeping Sookie in Hawaii with regular paying customer, Fat Danny: "I'm better off here, taking my chance on him. He can pay my way out from under Yoon. Then I'll start my own bar. I've seen enough to see how it works" (276).

By comparison, Macintyre writes:

Danan's story had a happy ending—almost. She escaped from her mama-san a year and a half ago with the help of a Filipino priest. Last June, she returned to Korea hoping to marry her G.I. boyfriend, only to face another bitter disappointment. He beat her, she says, and almost smothered her with a pillow. So she went back to the shelter run by the Filipino priest.

Macintyre's story of a Filipina prostitute clearly has connections with Korean/American literary works and other kinds of narratives and figurations that begin to appear through this megatextual approach. In addition, these connections reference the shifting discourse of an ongoing socio-political movement against human trafficking. This movement has been gaining steam due to the lobbying

efforts of non-governmental organizations and anti-trafficking legislation from Congress.<sup>118</sup> All of these overlaps point to the ways in which narratives, though circulating in different realms, have the potential to rewrite and reference each other, and in turn, construct meaning.

The intertextual readings in this chapter reveal, moreover, that narratives of Korean/American female subjugation are being manufactured, and as such, the figure of the Korean female prostitute is in danger of being constructed as constitutive of personhood. Insofar as Chuh has called for a “transfer of responsibility to the systems that produce victims rather than equating social identity with victimhood” (*JAAS* 10) as a necessary shift for using “comfort woman” as a category for redress, we must also examine how a social identity, like that of the “camptown prostitute,” becomes constructed as victimhood not just for Korean/American women but also for “Korea” as a socially constructed cultural and national identity.

Furthermore, by enfiguring the “camptown prostitute” as a contemporary construction, we begin to consider more fully how a formulation of a Korean/American megatext is “compositional” for these women’s bodies. As Yuh’s study discusses interviews with former camptown women (whether prostitutes or other kinds of workers) who became military brides, the process of becoming “American” for “camptown women,” that is obtaining U.S. citizenship through marriage to a serviceman, references other narratives and discourses circulating and

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<sup>118</sup> See the Polaris Project (<http://www.polarisproject.org>), a non-profit group combating the trafficking of women in children, with a focus on Korea-U.S. trafficking. For a brief overview of recent media coverage and advocacy relating to the sex industry in Korea and human trafficking, see Women’s Action 23.1 (June 2003), “United States: The Role of Military Forces in the Growth of the Commercial Sex Industry” ([http://www.equalitynow.org/english/actions/action\\_2301\\_en.html](http://www.equalitynow.org/english/actions/action_2301_en.html)). See also footnote 7.

readable through a megatext. This observation thus invites a critical approach that can apprehend the “flexible knowledges” that together animate gendered and racial constructions.

## **Conclusion**

Laura Hyun Yi Kang’s framing of Korean/American artistic projects as “distinctly mediated gestures” (*JAAS* 27) is particularly useful for reading Keller’s novels in that both *Comfort Woman* and *Fox Girl* are artistic productions that can be read intertextually with the lived experiences of Korean/American women. In this way, the novels are “mediated” by the social, historical, and political discourses constructing narratives “about” Korean/American female bodies. The American location of the author as well as the site of production are mediators of the narratives’ actual distance and difference from the subject.

Keller’s novels may attempt to address this distance with each novel’s shift in setting to Hawaii, a way-station of sorts for the characters coming from Korea and stuck in the process (perhaps not to be completed) of becoming Korean/American.<sup>119</sup> As this chapter concludes the project’s main arguments, I hope that it at least has brought us to a critical way-station, where we can recognize static practices of reading a text and its related discourses, and where we can make shifts to dynamic reading practices by conceiving of megatexts and their active archives. This dissertation’s megatextual approach promises to continue in its efforts to grapple with critical distances between texts and understandings of them. The following

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<sup>119</sup> Contemporary examples of Korean/American flexible citizens are detailed in the Introduction, footnote 19.

conclusion, though a mere gesture to a non-literary text, suggests a possible direction for a future expansion of not only this chapter's concerns with the construction of Korean/American womanhood, but also the previous chapters' address of the conditions for the popularity and subsequent marketing of Korean/Americanness in culture. The popularity of Margaret Cho, whom I briefly discuss next, is a construction that, through the technology of performance, crosses realms and cross-references discourses that may be more active than those detailed in this project.

## Conclusion: The Mega-making of Margaret Cho

This project's formulation of a megatext as an archive of texts, processes, and interpretations that together construct and rewrite meaning draws from Katie King's "flexible knowledges" requirement that we are "to give up mastery and to open up to risk, connection, and even enthusiasm." A megatextual approach seeks to reside in that novice space, so that one may shuttle between advanced disciplined methods and innovative strategies of resistance. A megatext does so by continually accessing texts that are not considered "scholarly" and that circulate widely in the mainstream, and it commits us to casting a wider net for our critical reading practices.

As such, this Conclusion prompts me to give up mastery and start over. While the Introduction opens with a narrative of Elaine Kim, the Conclusion can only provide the beginning layer for a narrative of Margaret Cho. Elaine Kim's work and methods are not only familiar to me but also intimately tied to most of the texts and discourses I raise. In contrast, I am acquainted with only some of Margaret Cho's work, and I have not fully thought through the connections between my arguments for a megatext and its political significance and Cho's performances and her political approaches. Nonetheless, as two highly recognizable Korean/American female figures, their work is being widely accessed in both distanced and overlapping realms. So, while for each chapter, this project formulated megatexts and advanced critical reading practices around literary texts, this section sketches how one might begin thinking megatextually about Margaret Cho and her performative text, *I'm the One That I Want*.

By gesturing towards a very different kind of text that informs an archive constructing Korean/Americanness, I hope that practitioners in other arenas will consider the work I've done here to be useful. My earlier emphasis on Foucault's author-function suggests that a bridge between scholarship and activism may be paved with artistic work. As such, I find this particular artistic piece by Margaret Cho to be operational in these liminal spaces, where it seems Cho herself "gives up mastery" to tell stories of her failures, which I will describe momentarily.

The main purpose of this project is to argue for an approach through which we might critically identify and read how Korean/Americanness is constructed variously and repeatedly in contemporary culture. This approach seeks then to identify possible sites of resistance to the limiting effects of those constructions through what I have called a "megatext." A megatextual approach makes contributions to the fields of Asian American and literary studies because it refuses to accept "Korean/American" as a stable category. Through their consideration of narratives as dynamically interacting with other texts and actively referencing discourses, megatexts also make critical contributions by complicating the notion of a "universal" aesthetic and the function of narratives. The archives that I have mapped, I hope, can help locate entry points for progressive social movements.

At the present moment, grass-roots activism seems to be waning in political culture. The dissolution of radical movements can be attributed in part to the impact of globalization. The discourse of globalization promotes teleological, developmental narratives of identity, especially for racialized, queer, and other subjectivities. The "multiple rhetorical operations" that manage and normalize "diversity" in today's



narratives of globalization include the intersecting agendas of global capitalism, neoliberalism, and multiculturalism (Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan 4-5).

In response to these shifts, Rachel C. Lee and Sau-ling Wong, for example, examine Asian American global/diasporic teleology via technology. Their study, *AsianAmerica.Net: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and Cyberspace*, collects critical discussions on how Asians Americans have engaged with, participated in, and otherwise been made subjects of the Web through their racialized, gendered, and classed identity positions. *AsianAmerica.Net* importantly tracks how subject formation and activism are occurring in more wired and less face-to-face ways.

A megatextual approach must address these kinds of formations—those less “texted” than, for example, works of literary fiction—in its goal to help advance the identity politics of Asian American movements going forward. Though this project falls short of defining a new political movement, I too support the “ethical refusal to provide a grammar that could make the complexity and density of the cross-cultural interactions generated by our present global condition immediately transparent and universally legible,” as Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan claim. Instead, this project’s formulation of a Korean/American megatext “would rather open them up” (4) and try to identify nodes for bridging within the obfuscations and interactions.

Here, briefly looking at Margaret Cho reminds us of interactions in the present moment and projects where and how megatexts may be formulated while technology continues to progress rapidly. Given that we are in need of new methods for bridging and advancing political movements, Margaret Cho’s work seems to take advantage of

the various nodes to which it has access. Her work is a product of entertainment media at the same time that it is an archive of social activism.

In entertainment media today, images, narratives, and constructions of Korean/Americanness are diversely occurring. First, we saw a few episodes of Margaret Cho's short-lived, all Asian-American cast sitcom, *All-American Girl* (1994). Then we heard about the show's failure described by Cho herself in her comeback, one-woman stand-up tour, *I'm the One That I Want* (1999-2000). The self-produced and self-distributed film of the same name was released to DVD in 2000. The book was published in 2002. In the current economy, new texts are constantly being (re)produced and therefore are simultaneously constructing meaning about Korean/Americanness. And Cho's work seems to reflect this simultaneity all too well.

In addition to network problems with the sitcom, *I'm the One* cites Cho's personal insecurities—her continuing struggles with body self-image, alcohol abuse, sexual promiscuity, and ethnic identity—as characterizing the failure of her career at that moment. Cho performs:

When you're on television you become a kind of community property. And people say whatever they want about you. And because I'm a woman a lot of people said that I was ugly and that I was fat. And then there was the Asian American aspect. That there had never been a star, an Asian American star, of a sitcom before. And this was really discussed everywhere. I opened up my newspaper at home to the editorial section, and they had printed a letter from a little Korean girl

named Karen Kim, 12 years old, who wrote in saying, “When I see Margaret Cho on television, I feel deep shame.” [*Dramatic pause.*] Why?! Why?! I guess this was because they had never seen a Korean American role model like me before. You know, I didn’t play violin. I didn’t fuck Woody Allen.

During the dramatic pause, Cho looks around the audience with expressions of extreme puzzlement. In multiple ways, Cho performs an emotional and physical narrative of how she fell from stardom to rock bottom. The narrative of her performance is framed by a theme of social acceptance. Following her repeated exclamations of “Why?!” she takes a bitter tone to consider the possible causes for the little girl’s feelings of shame. Cho’s presumptions about what common perceptions of Korean/Americanness, though clearly sarcastic, are drawing on actual Korean/American figures in the media: violinists Sarah Chang or Angella Ahn (of the Ahn Trio) and wife of Woody Allen, Soon-Yi Previn,

This theme of social acceptance, and the lack thereof, is the refrain of the performance, and it is also the vehicle through which she critiques social problems. Whether it is the Korean community’s or network TV audiences’ rejection of her, Cho includes them as a way of not only mocking or ridiculing her critics but also of politicizing the conditions for those rejections. Cho’s performance draws on such discourses as representations in the media and community empowerment for racial minorities and queers. At the same time, she consistently highlights how different she is (her body, her experiences, etc.) from many of her audience members.

Above all, Cho ultimately utters the battle cry that she will continue to perform until “someone just like her” can take her place. The likely fact that no other Korean “fag-hag” with Cho’s life lessons exists in comedy is the great irony of her proclamation: Cho acknowledges the responsibility of representation while at the same time realizes that being fully representative of any group is impossible.

Scholar Rachel Lee critically analyzes irony in Cho’s performance. Cho’s performances are effective sites for formulating a Korean/American megatext because of what Lee identifies as two discoordinate processes of queer subjectivity that Cho enacts simultaneously: one is “diva political intervention” and the other, “participation in camp” (115). These enactments are ironically in tension with each other—“diva” has a pedagogical function whereas “camp” refrains from a moralizing function out of its commitment to aesthetic stylization. Yet they are taking place during the same performance. As a result, *I’m the One* instantly references competing discourses.

Of the multiple media forms in which *I’m the One* may be accessed, Lee concludes:

In crafting a stage act, publishing a memoir, and releasing a film (all with the same title), Cho establishes that the spaces and modes of her parade are indeed multiple, and ultimately not decidable in any one form. Her performance work leaks across genre categories, effecting spontaneous—if ephemeral—bonds between spectators and herself, at the same time that her written memoir and film attempt to archive that ephemerality, and in that inscription partially overwrite communities

established via the environment of the theatre with communities of reading and cinematic spectatorship. (“Parade” 126)

Here, Rachel Lee’s examination of Cho’s performance points both to concerns raised in the previous chapter on figurations of Korean/American women and to theatrical constructions of Korean/Americanness—that operate as a matter of access and rewritable archive.

Lee also finds Cho’s productions “heroic” for the ways in which these texts multiply stage struggles over borders and bodies. But most importantly, Lee identifies in Cho’s texts the technologies of interpretation, archivability, and rewritability. What Lee calls “spontaneous” or “ephemeral” for Cho’s texts, a megatextual approach similarly considers as active or dynamic. The simultaneity of a megatext is supported by the dynamic interaction of texts and engagement with those technological processes.

A practical formulation of a Korean/American megatext should reference texts, sites, and discourses that it can reasonably access. Since Cho’s texts have been circulating for many years, interpretations of them have already evolved into discourse, as the critical analyses offered by Rachel Lee, among others, demonstrate. However, as several performances, films, and another book followed *I’m the One That I Want*, Margaret Cho continues to produce texts that dynamically construct Korean/Americanness. And moreover, like Don Lee and others, she manages her own official Web site, complete with press articles, a “blog,” and a shopping cart (allowing for the purchase of her DVDs and other products).<sup>120</sup> A blog (moniker for

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<sup>120</sup> See [www.margaretocho.com](http://www.margaretocho.com). At the time of writing, I had just heard unofficial news of Cho’s working on a script for a new sitcom based on her mother with the Fox network.

“Web log”) is any author’s unedited public writings, often in the form of a daily journal. Especially because blogs enable the constant and instant rewritability of texts, Cho’s Web site is an example of the kind of archive that we must confront in today’s economy for the ways in which it steers us to a certain kind of reading practice.

My hope is that megatexts will help us manage these mega-amounts of information in critical yet user-friendly ways. Inasmuch as these vast and fleeting archives of information are occurring multiply, even “erupting” in culture, we must first acknowledge that they function as modes of knowledge production, whether produced by scholars, artists, or other kinds of practitioners. Then, we must devise methods for reading the “flexible knowledges” that are circulating widely. A megatextual approach is one such method.

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