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Casting Identities from “There”: Korean Diasporic Art and Cultural Production

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Introduction. Touted as one of the first gatherings of art work produced from five of the oldest and largest overseas Korean communities – Brazil, China, Japan, Kazakhstan, and the United States – “There” reveals tensions stemming from transnational forces of contemporary cultural production. My analysis of this transnational production interrogates the social process involving cultural production by people who migrated across national borders and were profoundly affected by the ensuing displacement caused by separation from native cultures. Diasporic studies have lately become a prominent topic of historical and cultural research for the possibilities the field offers for inter-disciplinary work. In Korea, however, socio-political policies have befuddled conceptions of cultural affiliations and bound it within metanarratives of the ethnonation. On the one hand, Koreans pride themselves on a strong sense of ethnic homogeneity (*tanil minjok*) and ethnonationalism (*minjokjuui*). On the other, globalization discourses and (changing) government policies have complicated political, social, and cultural understanding of citizenship, identity, and affiliation. I approach the topic through an understanding of the history of migration, historical memories of artists, and social context of art production. The “There” exhibition shows, in some ways, that cultural production and artistic activities tend to reinforce the metanarratives of national

history. Yet, in other ways, they undermine them. At the same time, “There” showcases a multiplicity of other constructed identities related to class, gender, and locale.

This paper is part of a larger project that interrogates the connection between cultural production and identity construction within the context of the long history of cultural borrowing in East Asia alongside interviews of contemporary artists, curators, critics, and others whose oral history informs calibrated responses to a retroactive and nation-centered identity discourse. One goal of this presentation is to write a narrative of migration from the perspective of overseas Koreans. I distinguish this examination with three salient features. Primarily, the construction of this narrative will be based upon oral histories of the artists, curators, and others, since there are no texts historicizing wholly the “There” exhibition as a site of cultural production. Next, I contend that the understanding of cultural production is dependent on and reflective of social relations among these artists, other people, and the art work. Key to this analysis of artists, art practice, and artwork is the awareness of the mediatory role of art objects within a social process, rather than the interpretation of objects based upon aesthetic or semiotic readings of art. In other words, the process that I attempt to elucidate makes it impossible to rely upon representation, or the person→object→identity schema, because this simple transfer cannot account for the complexities involved within this social process. Finally, the field of diasporic cultural artists does not necessarily fit neatly into a category of immigrants. To say artists simply does not fully situate the differentiation in age, gender, class, artistic practice, locale at destination countries, time of migration, and the often transnational nature of artists’ lives. As a group under study, the selected participants, curators, critics, and organizers at the sites zig-zag their way through previously examined categorical

boundaries. The method, interdisciplinary approach, and transnational subjects of this presentation forge together an analysis that casts identities anew, that is, it grounds cultural possibilities to identity construction. As a whole, the analysis takes a diasporic domain of artists and the social processes – reception, exchange, circulation and discourse – that surround their production. This diasporic web synergizes discussions of identity with global distinction and local color.

Metanarratives of the Ethnonation and its Characteristics. Most studies of overseas Koreans by South Korean scholars project a nation-centered understanding of overseas Koreans' identity embedded within what I consider metanarratives of the ethnonation.¹ At base, the latter reifies a history of progress that is part and parcel of the modern Korean nationalist project of overcoming the long and arduous “history of suffering” (*sunan ūi yōksa*). Overseas Koreans, then, are viewed as critical components of this larger nationalist project. First, as pioneers (*kaech'ōkja*, 開拓者) abroad, they hold the potential to be the vanguard (*sōnbongdae*, 先鋒隊). In effect, they are exemplary subjects who may have suffered the most, depending upon the conditions under which they left the peninsula or the conditions into which they entered a destination country.² Secondly, Koreans abroad provide a unique resource for the future

¹ Nationalism and ethnonationalism will be used interchangeably. However, the salient feature of the latter, as Walker Connor defines it, is the self-consciousness of an ethnic group of a nation as well as those who are alien ethnic groups. The modern nation-building project did not diminish ethnic consciousness in favor of identification with the state, nor did this ethnonationalism wither away. He argues that “ethnicity” marks “the ultimate measure of political legitimacy by holding as true that any self-differentiating people, simply because it is a people (that believe themselves ancestrally linked) has the right, if they so desire, to rule itself,” (Walker Connor 1994, 38).

² A discussion about the overseas Korean's sorrowful suffering is offered in: Song Kōnho, “Miguk pangmun ki,” in *Song Kōnho P'yōngnon chip: Han nara han kyōre rŭl hyanghayō* (Seoul: P'ulpit, 1989): 11-31. Originally published in *Madang* (11) 1983.

(*miraeŭi chasan*, 資産), to serve as guides (*annaeja* 案内子), diplomats, (*woegyogwan* 外橋官) interlocutors (*woegyosajök*, 外橋事績), and as advance guards (*ch'ömbiyöng* 尖兵) to the world (*Haewoe Tongp'o* 1996, 46). Ku-hong Lee, head of the Research Center for Overseas Koreans, states, “above all, overseas Koreans are the people who can contribute as pioneers of the globalizing era,” (Lee 1990, i, ii).

The shift in opinion, from that of pitiful overseas Koreans as repository of suffering to their active roles as a vanguard for the nation, reflects a period of changing South Korean views in the early 1990s that occurred along several registers. First, the end of the Cold War brought about political realignments on a global scale that led, in effect, to a general thawing of relations between North and South Korea.³ Second, major economic shifts created for the emergence of multinational corporations, and such changes in economic relations globalized South Korean capital (again) and made South Korean firms themselves transnational investors. These shifts are important not only in terms of South Korea’s relationship to its overseas communities and its incorporation of “returnee” Koreans from abroad, but also in terms of the growing presence of foreign migrant workers.

Third, *segzehwa* (globalization) and the ensuing government policies continue to wield wide political, socio-economic, and cultural impact on South Korean thinking. Samuel Kim defines globalization as “a series of complex, independent yet interrelated processes of stretching, intensifying, and accelerating worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of human relations and transactions such that events, decisions and activities

³ If this can be considered one marker, it was not until September 17, 1991 that both the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea and the People’s Republic of Korea became member-states of the United Nations.

in one part of the world have immediate consequences for individuals, groups, and states in other parts of the world” (Kim 2000).⁴ *Segyehwa* has not only predicated South Korea’s inclusion into global structures of exchange like the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), but it has also effected significant changes in how South Korea views its *haewoe tongp’o* (overseas Koreans). The Kim Young-Sam administration decided in early 1995 to keep the romanized rendition for globalization, *segryehwa*, and specified one official connotation of *segryehwa* and the ethnic nation stating that, “globalization must be underpinned by Koreanization,” (Kim 1995, 273).

Some may see globalization, or the internationalization of economic relations, as part of progressive socio-economic shifts. However, in the case of South Korea, scholars argue that *segryehwa* evokes a strong national sentiment and overseas Korean communities have become an important component to a global South Korea. Perhaps *segryehwa* represents a “deterritorialized national community among Koreans,” (Park 1996, 3). Korea’s distinct globalization strategy, approach and policies punctuate psycho-cultural ties between its overseas communities and the “homeland.” Hyun-ok Park emphasizes the integrative aspect of linguistic tropes of emphasizing the inclusive concept of *tongp’o* (同胞 blood-kin, fellow Korean compatriots) over *kyop’o* (僑胞 Koreans residing abroad). Sociologists discuss a recent trend by nation-states’ to effect new forms of nation-building through the political or legal incorporation of diasporic populations (Basch et al. 1994). Gi-Wook Shin, for example, argues that

⁴ To convey just how omnipresent the term is and how commonly it is (mis)used in South Korea by politicians, policymakers, businessmen, academics, and journalists alike, Kim likens the use of *segryehwa* with the term that has brazenly depicted North Korea’s governmental policy - *Juche* or self-reliance (Kim 2000, 83-84).

Korea's globalization drive has been, from the outset, embedded within a clear nationalistic agenda. Globalization and nationalism are not contradictory concepts for Korea. He examines the interrelated processes of nationalist appropriation of globalization and the subsequent intensification of ethnic identity in reaction to globalization. Rather than what some proponents of globalization strongly purport about global forces superseding nations and nationalism, the close connection between globalization and nationalism is itself a paradigm of Korean globalization processes (Shin 2003). Within this process, the Korean nation-state is substantiated by an ethnic nationalism wherein blood (*hyölt'ong*) functions as a common denominator in constituting a collective sense of oneness (Shin et al, 1999).

The existing South Korean scholarship concerning overseas Koreans, migration policies, and identity are equally discrete. That is, they do not lie in the same field, neither in terms of disciplinary methodology nor in interdisciplinary understanding. Therefore, I will discuss diasporic cultural production in consideration of several sets of arguments coming out of South Korea concerning Korean overseas communities. One set of publications describes the social context of Koreans abroad and discusses their identity as linked to the strong force of ethnic identification to a homogeneous Korean nation. Many scholars, foremost among them Kwanggyu Lee, the director of the Overseas Korea Foundation, believe that in Korea, the affiliation of identity to the nation-state and the ethnic people are one and the same, unlike ethnic affiliations in other parts of the world (like America) precisely because of Korea's long history of foreign aggression and suffering (June 2005, Interview with author). In this process of interaction with the outside world, a strong sense of ethnonationalism is expressed in the

belief, for example, that all Korean people are descendants of Tan'gun, mythical progenitor of Koreans dating back some 5,000 years (Jeon 2005).⁵

Another set of arguments focuses specifically on the history of Korean migration to Russia, China and Japan during the open ports (post-1876) and colonial periods (1910-1945), tracing the build-up of national consciousness (*minjok üisik*) that arose out of the loss of sovereignty, forced migration abroad, and the inability to return back to their “homeland.” The three-volume series published by Kukmin University historians also focuses on national affiliation, but they hone in on overseas Koreans’ repatriation issues after liberation.⁶ Chang, et al read the historicity of the repatriated (and still remaining unrepatriated) 2.5 million Koreans since 1945 as intricately linked to the national issue of resolving the “present task” of dealing with the history of Japan’s war of aggression (Chang 2004, 5-7). Third, abundant new publications helped to commemorate centennials and other anniversaries of Koreans living abroad.⁷ Taken together, South Korean scholarship valorizes the meaning of “ethnos” and “homeland” as the foci of nationalist consciousness. Further, government policies support an agenda that works toward maintaining overseas Koreans’ identity as ethnic Koreans and offers support for the strengthening of relations with the homeland, as well as the utilization of overseas Koreans positions/power to assist state development (Yi 1998). In sum, South Korean

⁵ The concept of homogeneity expressed through the link to Tan'gun is a key doctrine of the new Taejonggyo religion, founded by Na Ch'öl in 1909 (as cited in Duncan 2000, 103).

⁶ Kukmin University Center for Korean Studies (Kukmin daehakkyo han'gukhak yôn'guso), A Study on the Problem of Post-liberation Repatriation of Overseas Koreans (Haebanghu haewoe hanin üi kwihwan munje yôn'gu), vol. 1, A Study of Post-liberation Repatriation of Koreans in China (Haebanghu chungguk chiyök hanin üi kwihwan munje yôn'gu), vol. 2, A Study of Post-liberation Repatriation and Settlement of Overseas Koreans (Haebanghu haewoe hanin üi kwihwan gwa chôngch'ak), vol. 3, (Seoul: Kukmin University Press, 2003). In English, see translations of selected key essays in *Korea Journal*44, no. 4 (Winter 2004).

⁷ One example is a recent series of fieldwork about everyday life and actual conditions (*silche chosa*) published by the National Folk Museum (Kugnip minsok pakmulgwan) from six overseas Korean communities including Uzbekistan (1999), Kazakhstan (2000), Russia, Sakhalin, and the C.I.S. (2001), Japan (2002), the United States (2003) and Mexico (2004).

scholarship and policy pose the question of how we fit overseas Koreans' communities into the history of progress, and their responses are framed within the master narrative of the nation. Considering the conditions under which such questions were posed, the nationalistic mind to redevelop the nation-state is not incomprehensible. My project, however, asks an entirely separate question: what exactly constitutes a history of overseas Koreans from the perspective of those living abroad? And how can this effectively bring forth other possibilities for existence alongside the tightly enclosed national narrative?

It has been argued elsewhere that nationalism is only one modern orientation of sentiment and self-identification, and the nation-state only one structure of political, cultural, and social organization. Prasenjit Duara, for example, has written that "principally, national history secures for the contested and contingent nation the false unity of self-same, national subject evolving through time (Duara 1995, 4). Based upon a rationalist, linear trajectory of time, Duara consternates that this narrative frames most of modern historiography as conceived in popular minds and by professional historians.⁸ I believe that the above overview of South Korean scholarship is one such presentation of a nation-centered narrative of overseas Koreans. In this linear narrative, identity construction is intimately tied to metanarratives of the nation wherein overseas Koreans are perceived as vanguard for the nation and as such, the spokespeople for a global South Korea. The problem of projecting any identity unto the six and a half million people

⁸ Of course, Duara attempts to "rescue history" by bifurcating national history in order to recover a historicity that is more inclusive and open to difference. That is, a bifurcated history shows that there are other modes of being and time, and they must be recognized. Duara demonstrates how dangerous it is for Othered historians to write, unconsciously, within master treatments of the past that "eliminates, repress, sublates the Other in the self...occluding differing conceptions of history while reproducing...the nation as the subject of History," (Duara 1995, 4-5).

residing outside of Korea, much less one attempting to frame this construction upon the ethnonation, is replete with fissures and fault-lines. There are provisional moments when the metanarrative seemingly becomes a seamless entity by galvanizing the masses, but this is equally disconcerting.⁹ Any history whose subject is the Nation is, in the least, progress-oriented, reductive, confining, and thus, as Duara points out, occludes the Other in the self. Questions of belonging are bound to irrupt, and these irruptions will provide sources of tensions that sustain this project.

Spatial Contours of Diaspora. Paul Gilroy presents the chronotrope of a black Atlantic as a spatial configuration that inserts race into discussions about the history of terror, rupture, *and* acculturation that was part and parcel of black people's conception of modernity. His black Atlantic brings agency and a cognitive capability to black folks, inserts history, and brings light to black figures and narratives outside of black particularism. Further, part of Gilroy's project seeks to ask the question between tradition and modernity, and by turning to the spatial scope of a black Atlantic, he can start to reassess the linear, progressive time conceptions of black political culture and various Afrocentric movements that were "enclosed at each end by the grand narrative of African advancement (Gilroy 1993, 190). As an antithesis to ethnocentrism and nation-bounded identity, Gilroy explores the doubleness and cultural intermixture of blacks to formulate that rhizomorphic, fractal structure of transculture and translation called the black Atlantic. He understands the latter as a chronotype, that is, "one single, complex

⁹ The best case of fusion, without doubt, is the 2002 World Cup mass mobilization of ethnic Koreans the world over who crazily cheered on the South Korean national team. However, one critic felt panic within this totalitarian atmosphere. See Kyunghwa Ahn, "Totalitarianism within Us" (Wuri anüi chönch'ejuüi), in *Bol: Panic* (Bol: konghwang) 1 (2005 Winter): 236-239.

unit of analysis of the modern world” used to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective (Gilroy 1993, 15).

I suggest a diasporic web that combines migrants’ experiences with the contents of local histories and global causes of movement. The diasporic opens up the analytic space to combine the larger historical forces of migration such as Korea’s incorporation into a world system, colonial rule, internecine war and division of the peninsula, Cold War politics, and subsequent U.S. occupation within a single spatial, analytic field. At the same time, the interdisciplinarity of the project allows for different types of logic to come together. The analysis presents as various artists within one site of cultural production, comparing their narratives not in terms of absolutes, hierarchies or universals. It is an examination of asymmetries, but asymmetries systematically interrelated. I believe art attunes to asymmetries in a fashion both constructive and sublime, and even as I emphasize the social process of production, there is still (and always) the unspeakable *lure* of the object that is a reason why people return to view the object again and again. Most importantly, it is through artistic production that a recontextualization of homeland and national identities can occur. In doing so, it brings into view other identities and allows for a combining into one material point the complicated issues involving migration, identity, and affiliation.

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