

Covert Language Ideologies in Korean American Literature

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In recent years, Korean diaspora literature has been the subject of growing interest in academic circles in Korea. While Korean Japanese literature has gained continual attention from both Korean and non-Korean scholars, mostly in literary circles within Japan, literature written by Korean Americans, Korean Chinese and Korean Russians has only begun to develop as a serious focus of interest. In this essay I will analyze literature written by Korean American immigrants, and closely examine critical essays written by Korean scholars living in Korea in order to illuminate issues regarding the different forces affecting the subject matter and language of Koreans writing outside of Korea. I will focus on how critical research about Korean American literature discloses covert issues of ideology in the content and language of Korean American literature. I will trace some of the arguments put forth by scholars in Korea regarding the place of Korean American literature in the broader spectrum of Korean literature; I will then briefly examine some of the themes as they appear in works by Korean American authors such as Native Speaker by Chang-rae Lee, Home Was the Land of Morning Calm by Connie Kang, Memories of My Ghost Brother by Heinz Insu Fenkl, One Thousand Chestnut Trees by Mira Stout, and East to America, a collection of narratives by Elaine Kim and Eui-young Yu. Finally, I will raise some questions for further research on the formation and re-formation of identity in Korean American literature.

It seems to be generally acceptable for Korean scholars in Korea writing about Korean American literature to 'graciously' embrace Korean American literature as an obvious and natural part of Korean literature. Such scholars argue that Korean American novels inevitably struggle with fundamental identity crises arising from the clash of their Korean identity with foreign cultures. One such scholar, Hong Ky?ngp'yo of Catholic University, notes that Korean American writing reflects the struggle of these writers to preserve Korean identity (1). Hong traces general themes of Korean American writing beginning with Younghill Kang, who came to America with the first sugar plantation workers in the beginning of the twentieth century. The scholar notes how early immigrant literature reflects issues relevant to Koreans back in Korea (specifically the Japanese occupation, the Korean War and political strife up through the eighties), and later reflects issues dealing with their immigrant experiences. The history of Korean American literature, says Hong, is the history of the Korean people overcoming difficulties in their process of immigration to the United States (1-3).

From the 1980s, Hong notes that there are several common themes that weave through the literature of Korean immigrants. Among these is the wish of writers to pass on their experiences to the next generation of Koreans who did not experience life in Korea. The fact that the content of the works is inevitably related to Korea but written in English is, according to Hong, a step forward in the introduction of Korean culture to the outside world (6).

Professor S? Chongt'aek of Kory? University argues a similar point in his introduction to the book A Study of Korean Writers Living Abroad. S? explains that literature by Korean immigrants reflects the conflict between race and nationality, and is colored with sensibilities particular to Korean culture (8). S? argues that in Korean American novels, such as Chang-rae Lee's Native Speaker, the crisis of identity that is at the center of the

work is directly born of Korean history and culture (20–21). Both Hong and S?, then, clearly see Korean American literature as a branch of Korean literature, written in English but nonetheless ‘Korean’ in the issues discussed in these novels.

One point that comes under scrutiny in discussions of the place of immigrant literature in the broader spectrum of Korean literature is the function of Korean language in the works. S? quotes scholar Ko W?n who explains that Korean American literature can be classified also as “Literature in English,” a title that would take this genre out of English literature and place it in a much wider category (20). S? also quotes Bill Ashcroft and his work on language and post-colonial theory in order to support his argument that although Korean American literature is written in English, it is still Korean literature inasmuch as it conveys sentiments unique to Korea. In his essay “Caliban’s language,” Ashcroft pursues the idea that subjects of colonial societies can take hold of language “and reconstitute it as a tool of empowerment.” He continues:

Language is one key feature of a set of relations of power which constitute imperial discourse. Rejecting the language will not alter the fundamentally productive power of the discourse itself. The future of Caliban’s language is not cursing but transformation (101).

In the eyes of Korean scholars like Hong and S?, then, is that Korean American writers use English as a tool to express ideas that are, in the end, ‘Korean,’ thus taking advantage of the ‘transformative’ power of language.

To strengthen their argument, Korean critics focus on the use of Korean words in Korean American literature. Hong Ky?ngp’yo, for example, notes the abundant use of Korean language in Korean American novels such as Native Speaker and Still Life with Rice ? words, titles, phrases, exclamations and expressions ? to support his point about the inevitable connection of Koreans to their homeland. He argues that, by deploying Korean words throughout their text, writers are consciously and self-consciously reaffirming their Korean identity, and making an immediate connection to Korean family and history. It is an attempt to preserve, says Hong, all that is Korean, and Korean words and Korean language snippets serve as vehicles in transmitting Korean culture (22). Korean American literature, Hong concludes, attests to the fact that above all, Koreans hold dear the values of family passed down from generation to generation, values which are clearly preserved in the literature of second- and third-generation Korean Americans (19–23). Critic Yu S?nmo also notes in his book Miguk sosuminjok munhak?i ihae [Understanding the Literature of Minorities in America] that the abundance of Korean words and ‘Koreanness’ are meant to inform the audience about Korea (151).

In summary, a brief look at some of the recent critical writing about Korean American literature in Korea shows that scholars agree on three main points: (1) that Korean American literature has an educational, didactic value to it, in that it informs non-Korean readers about Korea (by employing, for example, Korean words and phrases in the English text); (2) that Korean American literature attests to and performs ‘Koreanness’ thus preserving Korean culture for future generations to come; and that (3) Korean American literature is a part of Korean literature because it discusses issues relevant to Korean culture, namely the process of immigration and the negotiation of identities of Koreans abroad. These conclusions are interesting both for what they reveal about the state of scholarship about immigrant literature in Korea, and about Korean American

literature as having inherited some performance and didactic aspects of Korean literature. I will now proceed to examine each of these assumptions and uncover some of their deeper implications.

Regarding the assumption that Korean literature is valuable in its educational value for non-Koreans, let us consider Sau-Ling Wong's article "Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon." Wong argues that Amy Tan has acquired a readership "through acts of cultural interpreting and cultural empathy that appear to possess the authority of authenticity but are often products of the American-born writer's own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese" (181). In other words, Amy Tan presents herself as an authority on Chinese culture by producing a narrative that appeals to the expectations of her predominantly, according to Wong, white female audience (181). One of the ways she does so is by dispersing Chinese words throughout the text. Tan uses some words erroneously, and other words in places where they serve no purpose in terms of their informatory value, highlighting their peculiar use (182). Wong proceeds to argue that the function of these words "seems to be to announce, "we are Oriental" to the "mainstream" reader... she is in effect inviting trust in her as a knowledgeable cultural insider and a competent guide familiar with the rules of the genre in question: quasi ethnography about the Orient" (188).

I now turn to a widely cited study, "Language style as audience design" by Allan Bell. In this extensive, now classic sociolinguistic study, Bell argues that style is essentially speakers' response to their audience (145). He supports his argument with comprehensive proof from fieldwork in sociolinguistics, and delineates a detailed framework that points to changes in one's style of speech according to the presence of audience and non-audience. The main thesis of his work, then, is that all narrative is significantly influenced by those auditing, whether directly or indirectly.

Sau-Ling Wong writes that in uncovering Tan's misuse of Chinese words, she seeks "a more precise determination of Tan's stance toward her audience(s) and the types of discourses her works participate in" (182). What is significant, then is the audience of these works? In Tan's case, a white female audience. For their part, Korean scholars agree that Korean words in Korean American literature are meant to educate non-Korean audiences, and at the same time bond writers with their Korean tradition. And yet, I argue that both of these statements are mistaken. Still Life with Rice and Native Speaker provide two examples of how the Korean language is used, and I argue that both are very telling about who their imagined audiences are and, by implication, what role their imagined audiences play in the process of negotiating their Korean American identities. S? claims that the content of immigrant writing is more important than questions of audience (18), but in my opinion audience plays a much larger role in the conscious and indeed unconscious process of writing for Korean Americans than this scholar is prepared to admit.

Hellie Lee, for example, uses Korean sparingly in dialogue, and the Korean she uses is meant more to give an air of legitimacy to her text. Exclamations such as "*yah; li-ee-goo; Omona; Uhmoni; hangooksahlam*" are meaningless to audiences that are not Korean; they are meant, rather, to lend authenticity to the narrative, to convince the audience that the narrator is indeed speaking Korean. The fact that Hellie Lee does not follow any academic romanization system but rather spells out words as they sound adds to the visceral effect of the words. So it seems that Lee's audience is not so much the non-Korean audience

but a Korean (American) audience, and it is in the face of this audience that she seems to be trying to prove her authenticity.

In the case of Native Speaker, Chang-rae Lee uses Korean for a quite different effect. Many times the author does not use Korean words but translates what has been said in Korean and italicizes the speech: “[my mother] whacked me hard across the back of the head and shouted in Korean, *Who do you think you are?*” (58). What is interesting here is also Lee’s presentation not so much of what is being said but *how* it is said.

Lee describes more the manner in which Korean is spoken, to give a more immediate feeling for the reader: “*Byong-ho*, he said firmly. His voice was already changing. He was shifting into Korean, getting his throat ready. Then he spoke as he rose to leave. *Let’s not hear one more thing about it!*” (59). In this way, Chang-rae Lee seems to circumvent some of the pressure that writers like Helie Lee feel in their writing. But he obviously feels similar pressures, as is evident from the following passage:

When I step into a Korean dry cleaner, or a candy shop, I always feel I’m an audience member asked to stand up and sing with the diva, that I know every pitch and note but can no longer call them forth (249).

In his novel, Chang-rae Lee, I would argue, is not as overtly concerned with how his audience will judge him, not as intent to perform in Korean to the degree that Helie Lee seems to be. But from the overall content of the novel it is clear that the main character, Henry Park, is very much concerned with language and what being Korean means to him as an assimilated, second-generation Korean.

Heinz Insu Fenkl provides an alternative approach in his autobiographical novel, Memories of My Ghost Brother. Fenkl interpolates many Korean words into his text, but does so in an unassuming manner, by not providing extensive translations. He is consistent with his use of particular phrases, so that a non-speaker of Korean can conclude the meaning of the words from the context. One such example is his use of the word *Ungh*, an informal way of agreeing in Korean. Without ever explaining the word outright, Fenkl successfully recreates the sound and mood of the language. Other such examples are “the wooden *maru* floor” and “the hot *ondol* floor.” By inserting the Korean word without calling attention to its translation, the writer succeeds in conveying the sounds and feelings that accompany words such as *maru* and *ondol*. When Fenkl does choose to translate the Korean into English, he does so by successfully incorporating the translations within the narrative: “The other boys gathered around us chanting, ‘*Sajin, sajin*, Hello *sajin jigo*.’ I told them the American words, and they changed their chant. ‘Hello, pitcher takee!’ they shouted.” (164); “When I learned to talk, I said ‘*Aboji myondo*’ each time he shaved, and he tried to teach me the English: “Daddy, shave” (123). In both cases, Fenkl stays loyal to the sound and translation of the language without calling attention to the bilingual interchange. So it seems that Fenkl has less to prove regarding his ‘Koreanness’ than the previous two writers. Here, however, it is important to note that Fenkl’s background plays an important role in the way this writer has been able to come to terms with his identity. Born to a Korean mother and German father, Fenkl was raised in Korea and grew up speaking Korean as his first language. His mixed background propelled him into a third space, neither Korean nor Western. Fenkl’s hybrid identity seems to provide him with a freedom of expression that eludes other Korean American writers. With regard to this third, hybrid space, Smith remarks: “[The ‘in-between’ forms

of understanding between ‘home’ language and ‘foreign’ language] offer conceptual places where one need not accept the dominant structure of one or other position but instead can find ways of challenging and questioning these positions” (Smith 165). By virtue of his access to this hybrid, third space, Fenkl writes with less of a self-conscious and didactic effort, certainly in comparison with other Korean American writers.

Another example of a more successful incorporation of the Korean language is evident in Marie Lee’s young adult novels such as Necessary Roughness and F is for Fabuloso. Marie Lee tries to emulate the bilingual atmosphere in the lives of young Korean Americans, and does so by italicizing the English sentences spoken in Korean, while leaving the English in regular fonts:

“How was school today?” Jin-Ha’s father asked.

“It was fine,” she said. *“I’m doing an extra credit report for my science class,”* she told him, switching to Korean so her mother could also understand. *“It’s on bees.”* (F is for Fabuloso 20)

In this way, Marie Lee does not draw undue attention to her bilingual speakers and at the same time, makes the novel accessible to potentially different audiences. Also, Lee does not italicize words that other Korean Americans tend to emphasize ? such as Abogee or O-Ma ? thus making them a natural part of the text. For example, only once, at the beginning of Necessary Roughness, does she explain these words: “O-Ma (Young and I call her by the Korean word for mom, while Abogee makes us call him Abogee ? father)” (2). Thereafter, Lee uses these words in a natural way that does not draw attention to their foreignness. Indeed, it is interesting that her books are aimed at an audience of young adults who might be undergoing growing pains as a result of the negotiation of their varied cultural backgrounds, and generation gap with their immigrant parents. So Lee is not out to prove her authenticity, as other Korean American writers are, in face of a judgmental ‘adult’ audience.

In her book Home Was the Land of the Morning Calm, Connie Kang is less concerned with the Korean language than she is with the role of Korean culture in her identity as a Korean American. She writes the following:

My transcultural journey of four decades has led me down many roads my culture would never endorse. At the same time, I have been unable to break away from the innumerable intangible constraints of my culture or from family entanglements. But *Koreanness* is like being a member of a big family. You rejoice, fight, and sometimes stop talking to each other for a while, but the sheer effort of keeping the family together gives you this thing called *cheong* ? “love,” Korean-style.

Cheong, a complex emotion encompassing love, looseness, affection, affinity, trust, and loyalty, is at the root of Koreanness. To Koreans, there is no such thing as love at first sight. Love, Korean-style, is like embers in a smoldering fire; only betrayal can end it. *Han* is the other side of *cheong*. It is this indescribable fate that Koreans feel in the depths of their hearts and deepest recess of their souls. It is that inexplicable Korean belief in everlasting grudges, everlasting woes, everlasting wishes, and everlasting hopes ? rolled into one. The divided Korean peninsula best expresses on a large scale that collective Korean *han*, a sense

of incompleteness and unfulfillment. On a personal level, *han* is the Korean tenet of an eternal woe, unrequited love, and unending hope and wishes.

It is because of *cheong* and *han* that Koreans cannot agree to disagree. *Cheong* and *han*. Koreans esteem *cheong* and *han* as much as Americans revere the ideals of liberty, justice and the pursuit of happiness. *Cheong* and *han* make Korean life both meaningful and wretched. They create entanglements that prevent us from keeping our emotional drawers neat and tidy (298–89).

In this passage, Kang obviously sets out to educate the audience about two concepts of prime importance in the collective culture of Koreans. But in my view, Kang's sentimental monologue, which borders almost on a religious sermon, seems not to be directed so much at the non-Korean audience as to herself. By repeating this formula of *cheong* [ch?ng] and *han*, Kang seems to be positioning herself safely within what is popularly accepted as Korean culture. After working through her complexes as a Korean American raised in Japan, and the various difficulties she has in assimilating in one culture versus the other, she cops out at the very end of the novel to imitate an accepted and superficial view of Korean sentiments.

Helie Lee reflects a similar attitude when she writes, upon her return to Korea, "I'm not exactly sure what I'm searching for in this homogeneous country where everyone calls each other Brother and Sister" (14). In an enlightening essay on the myth of Korea's homogeneity, Sarah Nelson writes that "Generally, Koreans look for a single ancestral antecedent, and implicitly assume that a Korean ethnic group existed outside the Korean peninsula before its migration to the peninsula" (218); and that "Generally, Korean archeologists and historians, in seeking a single ancestral group which migrated into the peninsula, assume that something like Koreanness existed in the previous homeland" (220). "Korean ethnicity is seen as eternal," writes Nelson, "not as an emergent process. Few archeologists consider the *formation* of Koreanness within the Korean peninsula, for it is not possible to contemplate a time when Koreanness did not exist" (223). Nelson further notes that "this insistence upon eternal Korean ethnicity has consequences for archeological method and theory, as well as for interpretations of the past" (223). For example, Mira Stout reflects the attitude Nelson is pointing to. Stout, who sub-titled her autobiographical novel A Novel of Korea despite her admission of ignorance concerning the Korean language and culture, notes that while "leafing through Western books about Korea," she learns that "Korea ? 'the Hermit Kingdom' ? was one of the oldest, most insular nations on earth, autonomous, racially, linguistically and culturally distinct for 5,000 years" (44). "I craved a tangible definition of Koreanness." She notes:

The books' indexes yielded such dry characteristics as (a) the sanctity of hierarchical Confucian family and social relationships; (b) ancestor-worship; (c) advanced scholarship and artistic achievement; (d) self-reliance; (e) self-sacrifice; (f) pacifism; (g) harmony with nature (43).

Elaine Kim notes that another novel, Patti Kim's A Cab Called Reliable, protagonist Ahn Joo "relies on her essays [on Korea] on the World Book Encyclopedia's descriptions of Korean traditional agricultural values, frozen in time and uncomplicated by contemporary political and social change" (184). Such common views of homogeneity and the idea of a fixed form of Koreanness passed down from generation to generation has percolated through to 1.5-, second-generation Koreans and writers of Korean decent such as Helie

Lee, Connie Kang and Mira Stout, creating a rather intimidating myth of what Koreans 'should' be.

A clear example of the dangers in inheriting and reproducing such a superficial understanding of 'Koreanness' can be seen in extreme cases such as that of Yi Sun-Kyung. Yi mean-spiritedly uses the stage provided to her by her memoir Inside the Hermit Kingdom to present Korea in a negative light, threatening readers who have not had contact with Korea with false images of this country. Yi believes that being both Korean and a journalist legitimizes her right to judge Korea, and lends an objective air to her remarks. Ironically, her observations are anything but objective: "Many Koreans' favorite pastime is to indulge in self-pity and blame all their woes on their tragic past. It's a national malaise. They can't feel sorry enough for themselves. Koreans readily admit that they are a people of tears, and that the Korean War and the Japanese invasion have made them into helpless, pathetic creatures" (90). This quotation from Yi's misnamed chapter "Korean Lessons" epitomizes Yi's negative feelings towards Korea. Calling Koreans "pathetic creatures" attests not only to her condescending attitude but also proves her ignorance of what Korea is all about. She makes mistakes in her pronunciation of Korean words, adding inaccuracy to condescension; and most disturbingly, she exhibits not only her contempt for Korea but ignorance of its history and culture: "Koreans are ... proud of their culture, heritage and traditions, but sometimes I found it difficult to see why. For a country where foreign invasions were practically an annual event and whose greatest contribution to the world was the Moonies, the prevailing arrogance and feeling of cultural superiority were inexplicable" (52). In any case, Yi Sun-Kyung's novel stands out more than the others for its particularly negative agenda, and reflects a wide range of possible misconceptions inherited by second generation Koreans.

My point is that in many Korean American novels, the potential audience seems to have a great influence on the content of the works. Both Helie Lee and Connie Kang seem to try to cater not only to their English speaking audience, both Korean American and non-Korean, but to an audience back home, perhaps their families, friends and the Korean literary institution in general, in the face of which they try to prove that they are indeed a part of that tradition. Chang-rae Lee is more subtle and artful about working out his complex identity issues, but he too seems to be speaking not only to a sympathetic and perhaps uninformed non-Korean audience but also to another ? Korean ? audience that expects him to perform with a certain level of expertise regarding his culture.

The pressures felt by the three above mentioned authors become more clear when one takes into account that some segments of the Korean literary establishment assume that Korean American literature is an integral part or at least a natural extension of Korean literature. Underlying this assumption is the very controversial notion that there is such a thing as *one* 'Korean identity,' as seen above in Sarah Nelson's article. This notion, as well as the mythical notion of Korea's so-called homogeneity, permeates through to second-generation writers who see themselves answerable to that tradition. Connie Kang's elaborate discussion of *cheong* and *han* is a typical example of a reproduction of concepts considered to be milestones in Korean sentiment; by simply invoking them, she contrives to place herself in the tradition of one homogenous "Korean culture."

For comparative purposes, it is interesting to note here an article by Ling-Chi Wang entitled "The Structure of Dual Domination: Toward a Paradigm for the Study of the Chinese Diaspora in the United States." Wang analyses two major concepts that have

dominated and guided the Chinese diaspora in the United States: the assimilationist and loyalty paradigms. Wang explains that the assimilationist paradigm, which has “shaped public discourse on and dictated government policies towards the Chinese minorities” (151) is an approach found in the U.S., while in China, on the other hand, “the dominant idea used by scholars and government officials to study the Chinese diaspora...is loyalty or how well the Chinese in the U.S. and in other countries have remained loyal or faithful, over time, to their loved ones at home, to their native villages, or to the nation-state” (152). The analysis that Wang provides regarding the assimilationist paradigm is based on extensive research that has been conducted on Chinese immigrants in the U.S. over a long period of time, but such comparable research is very much lacking in Korean American studies. However, the loyalty paradigm argued in Wang’s essay is, I believe, very close to what seems to occur in Korea and provides an interesting parallel. Loyalty, Wang notes, “meant not forgetting one’s cultural roots in China and the need to retain Chinese outlooks, values and life style... This nonpolitical notion of loyalty exerted profound influence over the self-perception and development of the Chinese communities in diverse setting and different countries” (156). Most significant, however, is Wang’s conclusion:

From the...discussion of the two competing paradigms in the study of the Chinese diaspora in the U.S., it is clear that both are simplistic, unidimensional, biased, and incomplete. Both erroneously assume Chinese America to be homogeneous and monolithic. Each begins with a vision that excludes the perspectives, interests, rights, and well being of the Chinese American community and each also ignores the issues and findings raised by the opposite side (158).

The situation in Chinese American studies as it is delineated in Wang’s argument is clearly similar to the situation in Korean American studies in general, and literature in particular.

This problematic approach has various implications, one of which is in the field of language education. In a study of an elementary-level college Korean class, Mihyon Jeon observes that her Korean American students, despite their eagerness to learn Korean in order to achieve greater familiarity with Korean culture, resist any kind of two-way immersion program that would bring Korean and English speakers closer together and make both languages equally important in the classroom. Jeon discovers that behind their resistance lie the beliefs that “the Korean language and culture belong only to Korean people,” and conversely that “Korean language and culture are seen to be hindrances for entering into American society”; and that “they do not think that the Korean language and culture can enrich other people of different cultural and linguistic background.” This attitude is evident in Korean American novels as well. Chang-rae Lee writes:

And despite Lelia’s insistence that he go to Korean school on the weekends, I knew our son would never learn the old language, this was never in question, and my hope was that he would grow up with a singular sense of his world, a life univocal, which might have offered him the authority and confidence that his broad half-yellow face could not. Of course, this is assimilationist sentiment, part of my own ugly and half-blind romance with the land (249).

Thus, the issues arising in the field of language education are directly related to the idea of language ideology as expressed in literature. In reading Korean American

literature, it becomes clear that behind these works there looms a great shadow of academic Korean language and literature, an institution that presents itself as a homogeneous body that claims ownership of Korean culture and history, and that is available to Korean American writers as a source of inspiration and ideas (and to which they have to pay their dues). Following Bell's argument about significance of audience in the shaping of language style, I argue that Korean American writers have notions of "Koreanness" that they take for granted, which define a framework in their struggle to come to terms with their identities and overcome their inferiority complex. The idea that there is *one* Korean culture and *one* Korean language is clear also in the process of language learning in which second generation Korean Americans believe, with much encouragement from their parents, that the Korean language can only be spoken by Koreans but that on the other hand, in order to be a fluent speaker of English they must abandon their Korean.

Finally, let us consider some of the writers' own responses in a series of interviews included in Yun S?nmo's book. Chang-rae Lee, for example, explains that:

Complete assimilation into American society is, at this point, impossible. To most white Americans I will never be a true American, despite my birth here. On the other hand, cultural self-identification is problematic because my culture ? that is, what I know and what I have grown up with ? is American. Even if, as a Korean American, my self-identity may have more links to immigrant culture than, say, a fifth-generation Chinese American, attempting to reestablish a Korean identity is extremely problematic at best, since Korean Americans are already ontologically set apart from Korea and have within their own subgroups regional and class differences. Yet, this dichotomy of cultural self-identity vs. assimilation seems to me to be a forced one, since rigid demarcations of kinds of personal acculturation doesn't have to be one of the other. To survive and be a functioning member of American society, while also keeping your sanity, I guess an uneasy combination of both is necessary." (182)

Chang-rae Lee refers to the subgroups within Korean American communities, pointing to the kind of diversity that cannot but escape the "Korean culture" which Korean scholars abroad and many Korean American writers see themselves answerable to. In the introduction to their book East to America, Elaine Kim and Eui-young Yu state:

We decided to gather materials for a book that might intervene in the discussion from the flanks instead of head on, by bringing forth a variety of viewpoints to demonstrate how Korean American lives are linked but at the same time are multiple, layered, and non-equivalent... (xvii) The Korean American community is diverse and heterogeneous. Despite their national and cultural affinities, which are sometimes intensified by feelings of displacement, there are important generational, gender, and class distinctions, each formed within the other (xx).

Despite Kim and Yu's stated attempt to provide a "variety of viewpoints," it is clear that the field of Korean American studies in general and Korean American literature in particular both suffer from a lack of attention to the complex and multi-layered sensitivities of the Korean American identity. Elaine Kim herself has been criticized for

contributing to the deficiency of depth in addressing the very particular issues of Asian American Literature. Susan Koshy argues that “The lack of significant theoretical work has affected [the field of Asian American studies’] development and its capacity to address the stratifications and differences that constitute its distinctness within ethnic studies” (315) and that “Elaine Kim’s discussion of Asian American literature increases the number of groups covered… but this expansion of the field seems arbitrarily based on the accident of ethnic affiliation rather than on any critical or literary criteria” (326).

Kichung Kim, addressing the issue of how “Korean” Korean immigrant literature is, concludes as follows:

In the course of completing the transition, the immigrant Korean community will have become more than just Korean in its language, culture, and even in its population, for it will have incorporated various elements of the host/adopted country. So also will its literature have evolved into something more than Korean, for the writers and their works will have become hybrid in language, style, and theme: Korean American, Korean Japanese, Korean Russian, Korean Brazilian, and so forth. Consequently, not only will this literature differ markedly from Korean literature, but it will also differ markedly among its various branches. Korean diaspora literature in the twenty-first century will thus necessarily be a literature of hybridity and heterogeneity (272).

Kim’s vision for Korean diaspora literature, in all its guises, is optimistic. However, it is clear that despite the obvious complexity of identities evolving today in the diaspora community, Korean American writers today are still looking over their shoulder. They are subconsciously towing the various lines dictated by the Korean institutions of language and literature and perpetuating their Korean performance, thus short-changing the richness that their diversity can bring into their new identities as a Korean American community.

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