

REVIEW ESSAY

Out on the Rim: Four Korean American Poets

By Robert Grotjohn

This summer, I was reminded that the Pacific Rim has reached Northern Virginia, surrounding the U. S. capital. When my wife and I stopped at a Korean video store to ask directions to a Korean restaurant, we were helped by a pleasant young woman who seemed to speak little English comfortably. She drew a map that located restaurants all over Annandale, classifying each according to whether it appealed to Korean tastes or to naïve *wei-guk-in* (foreigner) tastes. That odd experience of being hailed as foreigner in the country of my birth frames my reading of four recent volumes of poetry by Korean Americans who also, through diverse methods and to varying degrees, locate Korea in America.

Suji Kwock Kim is the most accommodating cultural informant of the four writers in *Notes from the Divided Country* (Louisiana State University Press, 2003), her first book. In the second of four sections, she imagines the Japanese Occupation and the Korean War from her grandparents' and father's perspectives. The lyric immediacy and anecdotal horrors of poems like "Fragments of the Forgotten War," written in her father's voice, push a reader to imagine the personal cost of Korea's historical position: "I'll never forget the smell of burning flesh. / I'll never forget the stench of open sores, pus, gangrene, / the smell of people rotting who hadn't died yet." Throughout the section, Kim works from the most obvious suggestion of her title, treating Korea as the divided country. In "Montage with Neon, Bok Choi, Gasoline, Lovers & Strangers," the final poem of the section, she brings division to her Korean American self with a scene from contemporary Korea, imagining a blessing from her elders, men "old enough to have stolen overcoats & shoes from corpses, / whose spirits could not be broken": "may you never see what we saw, / may you never do what we've done." The blessing itself is divided by paradox: "may you never remember & may you never forget."

That blessing to her, an American, suggests that the divided country must also be America, the place where she lives, where she both remembers and forgets, from which her "notes" come. Poems from other sections place her in our divided American country as she writes of being Korean American or of Koreans in America. In "Translations from the Mother

Tongue,” which ends the first section, she reflects on “*Khimjahng*,” the autumn preparation of kimchee, and “*P’ansori*,” traditional story-song. She “want[s] to know what survives, what’s handed down / from mother to daughter.” That desire reflects her distance from the Korean culture of her heritage, some of which may be unknowable: “And I want to know what cannot be handed down, the part of you / that’s only you, lonely fist of sinew and blood, / . . . the part of you that first began to sing.”

In the poems “Skin” and “RICE, or Song of Orientalamentations,” Kim reflects on anti-Asian racist reactions by other Americans. In the first, she presents a “lady in pearls mistaking [her] / for the kitchen help [she] could have been, or be.” In the second, with one-word lines that stand out from her usually longer ones, she uses the voice of a man caught in Orientalist fantasies. He says, “I / see / you / completely. // I / see / the / Oriental / between / your / thighs.” Those fantasies place the Asian American subject in a static and foreign position, as the pun on “still” suggests when the man later says, “I / will. / Have / you. / Still.” The final poem of the volume, “The Korean Community Garden in Queens,” suggests that Korea has set down roots in the United States, that neither divided country is static, that Korea is no longer foreign.

Though Kim seems to argue that Korea is no longer foreign, she finishes that last poem by referring to the “gardeners in the old world.” That “old world” suggests various possible meanings, but one clearly indicates Korea, so that she presents immigrants who live somewhere else than in the country in which they reside, who are not yet American. Her linguistic content likewise keeps Korea and Korean in a foreign position. Korean words appear throughout the volume, but they are always transliterated and translated. America remains an English-only country, still(,) not globalized to an active site on the Pacific Rim.

In *Translating Mo’um* (Hanging Loose Press, 2002), also a first book, Cathy Park Hong embeds her informational content in the spectacle of the ethnic body in poems such as “Ontology of Change and Eng, the Original Siamese Twins,” “The Shameful Show of Tono Maria,” and “Hottentot Venus”; each of the title persons were non-whites exhibited in enforced public display in western countries. She includes her own body in that spectacle, titling the first poem “Zoo,” and identifying her body as, among other things, a “Sideshow [that] invites foreigner with the animal hide.”

Hong, in an often nonlinear or somewhat surrealistic style, writes few poems with identifiable Korean or Korean American stories the way that Suji Kwock Kim does. A reader

can pick up interesting tidbits, however. In “All the Aphrodisiacs,” Hong notes that *hangul*, the Korean phonetic script was “first used by female entertainers, poets, prostitutes”; in “On Splitting,” she wonders whether painting a Korean bride’s cheeks red “is a sign for blushing . . . for passion, good luck, or maybe it’s to hide the pallor.”

Like Suji Kwock Kim, Hong transliterates her Korean as romanized script. On the other hand, she is a much less dependable translator. Hong begins “Translating ‘Pagaji’” by telling readers to “*please fill all appropriate blanks with ‘pagaji’*,” then interjects 21 blanks into the poem without ever translating *pagaji* (gourd), which fits well in only the last blank: “In the old country, the old woman wearing a towel over / her head washed scallions in the _____.” In “Translating *Michin’yun*” as well, Hong never gives the literal translation of “crazy/wild woman” but offers multiple suggestions that approach the word’s denotations, beginning with the terms “Gorgon, lost hysteric” and moving through other patriarchal constructions of women “If hot-tempered, if having affairs, if too cerebral, if—.”

Sometimes, she engages Korean on the phonemic level, not even giving whole words. She begins “Zoo,” with “*Ga*,” identifying the sound of the first consonant in the Korean alphabet, and listing the others (na, da, la, ma, ba, sa, ah, ja) throughout the poem. In “All the Aphrodisiacs,” she again lists the first four consonants but this time with their names rather than just their sounds: “*gijek niin tigit rril*,” again engaging the sensual phonetics of the language. She further points toward the concreteness of *hangul* in “Scale,” using an apt description for the written construction of Korean syllables: “Korean characters, like stiff phonetic Legos, / wait to join with one another.”

Hong gives the English-only reader an illusion of access to at least the pronunciation of the Korean, but her book’s title preemptively disillusion because pronouncing *mo’um* as spelled would likely confuse her primary meaning of “body” with the sounds for “vowel.” As Hong writes in an endnote, the romanized spelling of “body” is *mom*, but that word also would be mispronounced by an English-only speaker in a way that plays with the mother-daughter bonds and tensions that surface in much Asian American women’s writing, including Hong’s and Suji Kwock Kim’s. Hong realizes a further possible confusion with *ma’hum*, or “spirit/psyche,” in the first section of the title poem, creating another transliteration that probably would yield a mispronunciation.

At least twice Hong mistranslates her Korean, toying with the reader who imagines her as a dependable cultural informant. In “Androgynous Pronoun,” after a list of words more or less correctly translated, such as “(*nakshil*) the sound of fishing. (*o-rak*) play,” she adds these two: “(*mip'ta*) rattling stomach (*yep-u-da*) bloated legs.” The words are the infinitive forms of two verbs: “to hate” and “to be beautiful.” In a facing set of more experimental poems, “Wing 2 (Secret Language of Home Exposed)” and “Wing 3 (Secret Language of Home Exposed),” she exposes no language to the reader. Her apparent translations are false. The first stanza of the first poem reads,

hills piss barley tea
fly rolling high spell eczema a
tongue coated blue rag washing
it tantrum shrill thickets

The first stanza of the second poem directly faces it, parading as translation:

udi ru ga moyok
he jigum kuk jinma
di sajimi musun omma
haggi shi-ru gaji ma ya gaji

The two stanzas share no words, however; the first line of the Korean stanza, for instance, translates as “Where are [you] going? Insult.” Perhaps the “secret” of the home language is that it, like the Korean or Korean American experience itself, cannot be fully translated.

In the informational content of *Treadwinds: Poem and Intermedia Texts* (Wesleyan University Press, 2002), Walter Lew, a well-known figure in Asian American poetry, often reads more like Suji Kwok Kim than like Hong. Many of his poems are set in a Korean context or include Korean contexts in them. Most of the Korean poems reflect his personal experience in visiting Korea; from those poems, a reader learns something of Korean culture and customs. In “18 Generations at Ssang-Nyong,” a reader learns of “ancestral mounds,” sees “Soft-eyed oxen” and “a thatched roof,” and sees a farmer drinking and singing “down at the makkoli house.” While Lew doesn’t translate “makkoli” (unrefined rice wine), he leaves little doubt that a makkoli house is a drinking establishment. He imagines advice from his grandfather in “Mound

1: Silent for Twenty-five Years, the Father of my Mother Advises Me.” In other poems, he uses historical events. In “Leaving Seoul: 1953,” he reconstructs his mother’s experience in the Korean War. In “Pyönsa’s Complaint,” he writes in the voice of a “pyönsa,” or “movieteller” who sat between the audience and the screen and “*provided live narration for silent and untranslated films.*” The Pyönsa complains that, with the advent of dubbing, “soon people liked / A void between // Themselves and the screen, / Where I used to sit.” In “1983” he includes Korean history, particularly the Koreans of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, “*les voix des enfants coréens / brûlant à Nagasaki,*” in an inspired parody of T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* and Reagan’s cold war.

Like Hong’s, Lew’s translation is incomplete and varied; in fact, some is not even in language: his “intermedia” include photographs and collages, some with Korean subjects. Lew also uses the Korean script *hangul*, as well as some Chinese and Japanese, often in combination with transliteration, and sometimes with translation. In the table of contents, Lew includes *hangul* and the other languages in many titles; some of the non-English words are translated, some transliterated, and some unchanged when a title appears above its poem. *Wei-halaboji*, for instance, appears in *hangul* in the contents, making it unreadable to an English-only reader. The word is translated as “the Father of my Mother” above the poem itself. Lew uses Chinese twice in the contents: the first poem is titled with the Chinese for astronomy, and “1983” is in Chinese characters. While he translates the second title when he presents the poem itself, nothing in the first poem translates or clarifies the title, so reading the title depends on previous knowledge or searching out translation help. The same is true of the *hangul*: neither translations nor transliterations actually help in reading the script itself, and the reader is left in my situation from the video store, either a foreigner to or participant in the discourse.

Lew’s refusing to pander to an English-only reader implies an argument for Korean as well as Japanese and Chinese as a necessary *American* cultural and linguistic background, as no more exotic nor out of place than the French he uses occasionally. The parody of Eliot, along with locating Korea in a colonial transfer of power from Japan to the United States, reinforces that implication. Eliot’s poem works through multiple cultural references that point toward ideas and texts central to Eliot’s western tradition. Lew’s demands on the reader for understanding *hangul* and other scripts, and his mixing of various cultural sources carry with them a new imagination of necessary cultural capital for the profitable reading of America and American

poetry. His *American* poetry demands the ability to read beyond an English-only or Eurocentric context. That insertion of Asia into America ties into Lew's political content, which is much more specific than either Suji Kwock Kim's or Hong's in its critique of American neocolonialism, a critique that surfaces in "1983" as protests against militarization, and in "Seoul: Winter, 1986," in which he sees "books for the English-as-a-Foreign-Language exam / For those who would study in the realm."

Even more pervasively than Lew, Myung Mi Kim engages the political function of language in *Commons* (University of California Press, 2002), her fourth book. In fact, that political function is her dominant concern. In "Pollen Fossil Record," the concluding section of the volume that gives a self-reflective extension of and commentary on the poetry of the first three sections in a near-parody of informational endnotes, Kim asks, "What *is* English now, in the face of mass global migrations, ecological degradations, shifts and upheavals in identifications of gender and labor? . . . What are the implications of writing at this moment, in precisely this 'America'? How to practice and make plural the written and spoken—grammars, syntaxes, textures, intonations . . ." She challenges the reader to "Consider the potential totalizing power of language that serves prevailing systems and demands of coherence."

Her method of composition intervenes with that "totalizing power," as underscored by her quotation of Adorno in "Pollen Fossil Record": "The fragment is that part of the totality of the work that opposes totality." Almost every page in her book consists of lines, words, or even sounds juxtaposed on the white space with no obvious syntactic or contextual connections between them. Unlike the other three writers, she "translates" almost no clear Korean informational content for an uninformed reader, giving only a single brief reference to the Kwangju uprising: "In this South Cholla Province where all vehicles had been confiscated, we resorted to walking, the method of travel in the Yi dynasty. We reverted back 300 years. / *Kwangju, 1980.*" A reader recognizes the reference only by already knowing of the uprising; Kim does not act as accommodating cultural informant.

Her engagement with language follows her lack of contextualized informational content. For instance, when she writes, "Sign scarcity, the greeting—*have you eaten today?*", she nowhere indicates that she has translated a common Korean greeting. Like Hong, who was Kim's student at Oberlin, she often breaks down language to its sounds, sometimes identifying sounds that are impossible to pronounce accurately in Korean, like "*pr*" or "*f fl*." In "Siege

Document,” a poem in *hangul* that remains untranslated except for the final line, she brackets each line with a pair of transliterations, one in standard romanization, and one in her own attempt at accurate phonetic representation in a process she explains as “Rehearsals of listening: practicing sound and gesture between languages, between systems of writing. How physically (almost physiologically) impossible it is to pronounce or even imagine what Korean words are being depicted under the standard (standardized) romanization of Korean. The odd vowel blurs, the unclear consonant combinations. Poised between a spectral and a real engagement with Korean.” In the bracketing transliterations, Kim’s Korean appears in three ways to an English-only reader, none of which is particularly informational, none of which can actually be read as accurate representation. The several levels of always already misunderstood translation/transliteration make available a critique of poems like Suji Kwock Kim’s that seem to offer uncomplicated linguistic representation. Often, the only way to “get it” in Myung Mi Kim’s volume, even on an informational level, is to be able to read and understand *hangul*.

For Myung Mi Kim, translation is totalizing, blending other languages into an English-only American speech. Such an imagined American speech, however, is inaccurate to the real American speech as it exists in, for instance, the Anbang Video Store and similar environs. If a work leaves something untranslated, a full reading experience de-exotifies, while a translated reading experience requires no attempt at more than “spectral” understanding and thus leaves the translated language/cultural in an exotic position no matter how much the text contains historically or culturally referential “meaning.” Perhaps, the more “foreign” that poems might seem, as they might in Myung Mi Kim’s fractured presentations, the less foreign they actually are, at least in a globalized America, because they require a reader to, as Myung Mi Kim writes, “Consider how the polyglot, porous, transcultural presence alerts and alters what is around it.”