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## ***Autoethnographic Cultural Criticism as Method*** **Toward Sociological Imaginations of** **Race, Memory and Identity**

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**Abstract:** This article represents a growing body of literature that fuse creative modes of writing with the academic discourse using an autoethnographic approach to cultural analysis. Shuttling between theory and practice, I situate my research preoccupations in relation to the growing body of literature on Asian American cultural production, memory, and identity. Influenced by diverse writers such as bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, Elaine H. Kim, and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, who have discussed or practiced autobiographical writing/autobiographical cultural criticism, I highlight key moments in my life as an aspiring scholar and in spheres outside of the academy to engage the theoretical literature. I weave these different moments as part of a larger critical enterprise to trace the gradual rise in consciousness around issues of race, memory and identity as they have touched my life, and to demonstrate the power of writing with the ‘sociological imagination’ through autoethnography.

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### **I.**

*The first fruit of this imagination—and the first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.*

—C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*

C. Wright Mills once wrote about the power of the ‘sociological imagination’ to connect one’s biography to the larger historical forces surrounding the individual. It was something that always resonated with me since I first encountered the concept during my undergraduate studies: the power to connect my own experiences to the forces of history and understand my relation to the social world. In doing so, I would be able to understand the often-invisible forces that shaped who I am, and to some extent, my life chances in the world. And while he went so far as to distinguish between “the personal troubles of milieu”

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and “the public issues of social structure,” I would like to add another powerful ingredient to the mix. The power of memory, which includes remembering and forgetting the experiences we encounter in our everyday lives, and its intimate connection to images and emotions that are often ‘wordless’ yet socially and collectively meaningful.

In many ways, these images and emotions are beyond the capacity of speech, yet within the representational reach of the allusive, the symbolic and the metaphoric that comprise our collective imagination. In these different realms, images and emotions may be triggered by a lingering scent, a strange sensation, the lull of someone’s voice, or an artifact or memento from the past. For me, the personal engagement and fascination with memory began with a handful of photographs of my mother, who passed away many years ago, and attempting to understand her past in relation to my own experiences, and writing about them in my doctoral project on independent overseas Korean women’s cinema.

From the global flows of immigration, exile and diaspora, new ways of thinking, speaking, and seeing have emerged as well as representational languages and styles. Cinema theorists such as Kobena Mercer, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and Hamid Naficy have noted this development of *alternative epistemologies* and *cinematic languages* that are parts of the power-inflected spaces of diaspora, (post- or neo-) colonialism, and cultural apartheid. The early roots of Asian American cinema are clearly *activist-oriented*, tracing the effects of racist and colonial representations on diasporic peoples across the globe. Yet, as Laura Marks (2000) argues, the work of ‘historical excavation’ is often a ‘willful construction’ of fragmented stories, dreams, and fantasies that are threaded together as parts of the collective register of communal history.

Intercultural artists are in a position to interrogate the historical archive, both

Western and traditional, through their ‘double-consciousness’ of cultural marginalization and homelessness in competing world contexts. In doing so, they’ve attempted to fill the gaps with their own histories, or to force a gap in the archive so as to create a space in which to speak and for others to follow. Yet, this type of undertaking opens up old wounds and magnifies traumatic personal and family memories, only to create an empty space where no history is certain. This lack of certainty, or sense of suspension, forces the artist to contemplate this ‘emptiness.’ In some ways, the images they produce are narratively thin, but burst with emotion: they are the product of a process of mourning for loved ones outside of the artists’ reach. These loved ones, so to speak, may be people, places or ways of inhabiting the world (Marks 2000: 5). They are emblematic of a past that once was, something that preceded the traumatic dislocation of culture(s). Through this process of mourning (and remembering what is lost), the individual-artist’s experience becomes something that is collectively shared with spectators. The process involves holding on to an artifact of culture, including photographic images and mementos, in order to coax the memories from them. It attempts to translate to an audiovisual medium that cannot be named, something that exceeds narrative, but can be understood through other forms of knowledge such as the ‘memories of the senses’ (Marks 2000: 5).

Think of those moments when through sight, sound, smell, touch or taste, a memory (or image) comes to mind. For someone who has mourned the loss of a loved one, I can identify with those moments, especially in coaxing the memories from other peoples’ stories and family photographs. I tried to open a space for my story and those of others, such as my parents’ and my *kyop’o* sisters, who were born in Korea and raised abroad, that are usually left unheard or unspoken of in the historical archive.

My earliest childhood memories are literally images of my mother and father working in the corner store. In fact, most of my memories of them are associated with work. They were always busy doing something. Work determined the rhythm of their daily lives, and of course, as the eldest child, I was not spared of that ‘protestant ethic.’ Everyone had to pitch in and we all had to succeed in our different endeavors. Even after my mother’s death, which happened so long ago, these memories continue to haunt me. They fuel my desire to write about things that seem so ephemeral—like memory, identity, and cinema. But, I would also argue these memories are deeply visceral. There is an intimate connection between what one remembers and, perhaps, chooses to forget, and how it unfolds as a self-narrative or narrative shared with others.

My own story is deeply entwined with the experiences of my immigrant parents. Their experiences shaped my engagement in the social world. Their hard work taught me to excel, their hardship taught me to be critical, and their pain and sadness taught me to be angry. But, most important of all, their hope for a better future taught me to be compassionate and forgiving and committed to social change. Unlike the traditional genre of personal memoir or autobiography, my doctoral project represented an effort to transcend the ‘peculiarities’ of my own biography and that of my parents to connect them to a series of investigations on cultural identity shaped by the forces of assimilation, immigration, and racialization in a multicultural landscape. It attempted to be *sociological* by exposing those deeply embedded forces that constrain our daily lives; forces that we often take for granted because they are left unarticulated or even misrecognized. While my parents could not do so in their adoptive tongue, I attempted to do so in the project by turning to (personal) memory and experience. I reflected on snapshots of my past

in order to tease out those deeply embedded forces.

In trying to make sense of it all, I recognized that words alone could not describe the memories that connect back to my childhood experiences. I needed images and emotions to render their expressive capacity. And perhaps that is why I turned to film and video to make them more fulsome and robust. Through the perfect collusion of action, framing, music, gesture, pauses, dialogue, blocking, and the cut, the spectator is invited to what Toronto-based independent filmmaker Helen Lee calls “*the materiality of the moment*” (Shimizu and Lee 2004). This is where the imagination of the artist/filmmaker offers a space without the headiness of text or words (i.e., pure dialogue). It’s something “ineffable” yet remains personal, grounded, and specific. It’s that “moment of recognition when you see someone on screen, somebody who speaks to you through some kind of complicated image/identity system, and you in turn feel recognized, understood” (Shimizu and Lee 2004: 1391).

While for Lee that “moment of recognition” came at childhood when she saw Nancy Kwan in *The World of Suzie Wong*, it came much later for me—during my early 20s—when I watched a documentary on a Korean family based in Toronto, Canada.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting back on that “moment,” the attraction and lure revolved around the intimate portrait of immigrant parents dealing with their Canadian-born/raised children. In many ways, the portrait reminded me of my own struggles with my parents and made me more sensitive to their struggles and sacrifices in running a small business. Somehow, I was implicated in that viewing and it put into sharper focus emotional wounds that I tried to forget: the shame I felt in working in the corner store mixed

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<sup>1</sup> *Scenes from a Corner Store*. Sun-Kyung Yi. 1996. 45 minutes, video. Aysha Productions. Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

with feelings of anger and guilt towards my parents for owning a corner store. Of course, this was further complicated by my desire to craft a voice that would, at times, replace the loss of my mother as well as shape my own identity.

In a roundabout way, the images I saw in the documentary compensated for this loss and encouraged me to unpack the 'headiness' of the relatively dense academic discourse on memory and identity by way of a visceral, evocative, and grounded approach. The moving images fleshed out memories that were very often fragmentary and piecemeal. And they brought to life what was once dormant and stagnant. They definitely stirred something deep inside me. The stories I grew up with and the fragmentary memory-images I had of my mother brought to life reconstructions of her past. They revealed different facets of her personality and way of being. And based on those experiences, I made a connection between the magical power of memory and filmic/video images. Both share similarities in their ability to capture brief snapshots in time and space. And often, they are complicated by the temporal intrusion of the *past-in-present* and layered spatial compression of the real and the symbolic.

## II.

*When words call, to answer, to satisfy the urge,  
I must come again and again to a solitary  
place—a place where I am utterly alone. In that  
moment of grace when the words come, when I  
surrender to their ecstatic power, there is no  
witness. Only I see, feel, and know how my  
mind and spirit are carried away. Only I know  
how the writing process alchemically alters me,  
leaving me transformed... Written words  
change us all and make us more than we could  
ever be without them. —bell hooks,  
Remembered Rapture*

Feminist literary theorists and critics such as Rita Felski, Mary Eagleton, Linda Anderson, Gayle Greene and Coppélia Kahn have noted the rich body of contemporary women's writing that has flourished over the last forty years. And they have also observed its symbiotic relationship with autobiography, which as Linda Anderson remarks, is 'the shadow and locus for its evolving debates about the subject' (Anderson 2006: 119). As they argue, autobiographical writing has played a crucial role in feminism's development as a 'privileged space' for women to discover new forms of subjectivity. Anderson, for instance, traces the complex trajectory of feminist theorizations of this autobiographical space, from a field of feminine difference (as exemplified in the writings of Hélène Cixous, or what she calls '*l'écriture féminine*') through *testimonios* (testimonials) to Carolyn Steedman's conception of autobiographical memories as "interpretive devices," or ways of interrogating the "truth of theory," rather than as personal confessions. In her overview of the genre, autobiography has served to interrogate feminism from within by opening up questions of identity, difference, and the role of the reader of autobiography.

Like Steedman (1986) and Hua (2005), I agree that memory allows reflection on a social configuration without reifying or generalizing the self. Thus, autobiographical writing puts into practice a notion of the self as a "point of view," which can allow new insight into "the construction of particular conjunctural social moments" (Probyn 1993: 99). This notion of "point of view" suggests that images and memories within the autobiography relate to material situations and objects but they are also inflected through systems of discourse and imbued with the feelings of real people. That is, they serve as a bridge, or "historical structure of feeling."<sup>2</sup> This is clearly the case in the writings of bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Cherrie Moraga—women of colour



writers, who have deeply influenced me to write from my “point of view.”<sup>3</sup>

My own journey has been marked by a series of migrations across the globe, different rites of passage from daughter, graduate student, wife, to feminist scholar, and finally, starts and stops along with side trips (or detours) to only find myself back where I began: a keen interest in voice, narrative, and identity. Even though the journey hasn’t been straightforward or clear-cut, I still find myself drawn to its path. In part, this journey (or coming to voice) is very much about self-expression and finding creative ways to articulate different standpoints but also, understanding that I am not alone in the search (which, incidentally is very reassuring). I’ve been fortunate enough to nourish my soul and intellectual pursuits among a community of scholars who are sensitive to the different intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, and class (to name a few markers) and who are equally committed to breaking the yoke of institutional racism, sexism and classism in society.

Unsure of the final destination, I do have signposts to guide my journey by way of the different scholarly writings I’ve encountered during my research and academic training, and a strong commitment to blend (and perhaps, juxtapose) the different voices I’ve crafted as a second-generation Asian Canadian woman from a working-class background with academic

aspirations. In many ways, a *mélange* of voices that cut across the personal markers of my “difference” and the one the academy lauds as acceptable (i.e., theoretical, analytical, neutral, and objective) have shaped who I am, how I think, and what I deem important in my scholarly pursuits. And like all journeys, we need time for respite. We need to rest in order to restore ourselves and sometimes, we need to backtrack in order to move ahead. This is one of those times when I can look back to get a sense of the big picture of how this *blending of voices* came about, and ultimately, to acknowledge the strong influences on my intellectual development, and the different writers and theorists who have shaped my ideas and worldview. If there is one fundamental thing I’ve learnt from this journey, and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés puts it well, “life, like narrative, is not linear; even chronology misleads” (Milanés 1998: 325). And this *blending of voices* has many beginnings, each monumental as the next, without an end in sight.

At the cusp between student and scholar, I was invited to an academic conference focused on Canadian Studies, and to give a talk at my father’s *alma mater*: Korea University. Thirty years after he left Seoul, he accompanied me during this trip and we were both thrilled that I would engage a community of scholars considered the elite of Korean society. Here I was the only female graduate student, who spoke English “with no accent” among comparatively older, male, tenured professors specialized in Canadian Studies. What also seemed peculiar was that I presented a paper on the identity issues confronting second-generation Korean Canadians among specialists trained in political economy and international relations. I stood out at all possible fronts; it made me feel uncomfortable.

Though it was unclear at the time, what transpired during the two weeks I shuttled between extended family and academic life

<sup>2</sup> On this notion of the “point of view,” see Probyn, Elspeth. 1993. *Sexing the Self: Gendered Positions in Cultural Studies*. London and New York: Routledge.

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent anthology of critical writing by women of colour literary theorists, see Stanley, Sandra Kumamoto (Ed). 1998. *Other Sisterhoods: Literary Theory and U.S. Women of Color*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. For a survey of essays on postcolonial literary theory, see Singh, Amritjit and Peter Schmidt (Eds). 2000. *Postcolonial Theory and the United States: Race, Ethnicity, and Literature*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi.

revealed to me the trip had different meanings for my father and myself. For my father, it was a bitter-sweet homecoming; a return to his homeland that gradually opened up old wounds between siblings, and feelings of guilt and shame in what he left behind (i.e., a prestigious job) and what he felt were meager accomplishments in his adoptive home (i.e., the loss of his wife, several failed businesses, and a low-paying job as a short-order cook). For myself, it pushed to the forefront mixed feelings toward my cultural heritage. Having spent a good part of my childhood and adolescence “white-washed”—or the cultural equivalent of a “banana”—I was suddenly shocked by the plethora of faces that looked like me, but unlike me in terms of daily mannerisms and general outlook. Feelings of shock, frustration, and anger eventually turned into awkwardness. My self-confidence was chipped away gradually.

Ironically, my father and I felt like outsiders in a place where we were supposed to belong. And it was even stranger for me to bear witness to his frustration and pain. Two moments still stand out from that trip: the night I heard my father weeping in front of his siblings asking for their forgiveness in failing to meet his obligations, and his response to me when I asked him if Korea could ever be his “home”—a place where he could return to and seek refuge in the familiarity of a common language and the comfort of his family (i.e., brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews). In sharp contrast to the tears and emotional tension of the family discussion several nights before, during our flight back, he turned to me and answered: “Korea could never be my home. Canada *must* be my home.” There was a sense of resignation in his voice, but it really struck me that he felt he had no choice but to make Canada his home. His quiet determination to succeed, despite the difficulties he endured in losing his wife and a series of unsuccessful businesses,

generated mixed feelings inside me: anger, shame, sadness, and helplessness, which served to propel a steadfast determination to chart a course different from my parents. It was perhaps at this moment that I wanted to write about the frustrations of being an “outsider”—be it immigrant, female, or working-class.<sup>4</sup>

The piece focused on the critical reception of her earlier personal essay published in *Newsweek* magazine, which I naturally tracked down and read with anticipation. In the *Newsweek* piece, she argued that while many of the problems which caused the riots derived from the racial history of the United States, the media played an influential role in focusing upon and contributing toward creating and perpetuating the *myth* of a Black-Korean conflict. From her standpoint, it was “another case of visual media racism.” Their portraits of a Black-Korean problem were in fact “a decontextualized manifestation of a much larger problem” and only served “to divert attention from the roots of racial violence in the U.S. not created by African Americans or Korean Americans.” During and after the riots, the major media and some European Americans discussed the conflicts as if they were watching a “dogfight” or a “boxing match,” which enraged many Koreans. Another beginning is when I decided to change my research project from interviews with second-generation Korean Canadians to an analysis of films and videos produced by Korean American/Canadian (or *kyop’o*) women filmmakers. It happened while living in Tokyo. After several months of struggling to get the project off the ground, along with the culture shock of not fitting in with the daily rhythm of Japanese

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent collection of essays discussing the intersections between race, ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality by women of colour writers in the United States, see Anzaldúa, Gloria and Cherrie Moraga (Eds). 1981. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press.

life and being far removed from an English-speaking (academic) community, I endured a fairly lengthy period of solitude induced by research. I spent time alone drifting between cultural worlds and lost in my thoughts, unsure of where I was going with the research project. Staring at old childhood photographs, I kept focusing on the images of my mother, wondering what her life had been like when she was younger, or even around my age at the time. Then I came across an essay by Elaine H. Kim (1993) on her perspective of the 1992 L.A. Riots, as a Korean American; it struck a chord in me.

In the essay that followed the *Newsweek* publication, Kim (1993) recounts the editor's attempts to change the essay, its eventual publication as is, and the resulting hate mail from the American public. Poignantly, she connects this negative reception to the ambivalent and precarious position of Korean Americans in the United States. She writes, "The letters also provided some evidence of the dilemma Korean Americans are placed in by those who assume that we are aliens who should 'go back' and at the same time berate us for not rejecting 'Korean-American identity' for 'American identity'" (Kim 1993: 223). She then connects the Korean notion of *Han*, a cultural construct of sadness, hope, and lament considered a national trait or collective consciousness of a people, to the social positioning of Koreans in America.

What struck me about the two essays was the fluid movement between personal biography and social analysis. The fact that Kim could connect her experience with other Korean Americans to the larger history of racism in the United States demonstrated the possibility (and promise) of the "sociological imagination." It also brought to the forefront a new voice and fresh perspective to the race riots (and history of race relations in America), and produced within me a strong *symbolic* connection to people who shared my racial/ethnic back-

ground. It was around that time I developed a pan-Asian (North) American consciousness. In broad strokes, I could identify with the plethora of emotions including anger, frustration, disorientation, and general unease in both multicultural and homogeneous cultural contexts, which were described in a range of aesthetic domains such as film, literature, and art. The sense of "otherness" resonating across these cultural spheres spoke to me, especially in raising important issues about centers and margins, about representation, about origins, history, and memory, about nationality and transnationality, about race and ethnicity, and about gender and sexuality in contemporary society.

The different articulations of "particularity" meshed well with me as well as the need to examine the ontological status and representations of Asians in North America both as '*immigrant*' and '*citizen*.' It seemed my own life experiences confirmed their importance. Having grown up in Canada and lived in Japan for several years, I have some unique insights into the contradictions of what constitutes a '*citizen*' and '*immigrant*' in diverse cultural settings. Whether citizen (in Canada) or immigrant (in Japan), I was a cultural/racial minority. There was always a sense of living at the periphery and fragile sense of belonging. I was curious to research these experiences further in the academic literature, which in turn directed me to the area of Ethnic Studies, and in particular, Asian American Studies.

Asian Americanists such as Gary Okihiro, Lisa Lowe, Elaine H. Kim and Ronald Takaki opened my eyes to the "exclusionist" history of Asians in the United States, and the critical importance of developing a pan-Asian American perspective on this issue. Historically, the term, *Asian American*, could be traced back to the political coalition of different ethnic Asian communities in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s. During this period, according



to Nazli Kibria (2002), the larger social changes of this time included immigration law reforms and the enactment of civil rights legislation, which consequently launched the United States into a period of what is often referred to as the “new immigration.” Like their predecessors in previous times, the new immigrants of the post-1960s have been the focus of considerable anxiety and often of anti-immigrant fervor and activity on the part of the dominant society.

A common thread weaving the different articulations of Asian American (and Asian Canadian) subjectivity over the years is the sense of “otherness.” A number of critics have framed this sense of not being part of the dominant white culture in different ways, often cutting across the trajectories or shifting boundaries of the international, the national, and the transnational. For those Asian Americans (and Asian Canadians) who write about their experiences in negotiating their cultural identities, they grapple with the question of *who they are, from whose perspective they view their lives, and from which position they are speaking.*

Given the efflorescence of Asian American writing and cultural criticism, this body of work underwent a series of transformation over the years. As early as 1973, writers like Frank Chin pressed the notion that *Asian Americans* have “evolved cultures and sensibilities distinctly not Chinese or Japanese and distinctly not white American” (Chin et al, 1973: xi). According to them, ‘otherness’ stemmed from one’s ethnicity (or birthright in China and Japan), a signifier “to distinguish you from being American-born, in spite of the fact that you may have no actual memories of life in Asia” (Chin et al, 1973: xiii). In his Introduction to *Aiiieeee!*, the first edited collection of Asian American writing, Chin distinguished between “real” Asian Americans, whom he defined as those born in the U.S., and Asian immigrants to America. This

crude distinction, however, was problematic in that it constructed a subject position by making another group (Asian immigrants) into a new kind of ‘Other’ against which he could define Asian Americans. The subject of their attack was the different forms of “Orientalism,” which pervaded in the dominant culture at the time, and exposing the logic of “accommodation, adaptation, and appropriation of the familiar orientalist geopolitical imagination” of the larger American public culture in granting classics such as Maxine Hong Kingston’s, *Woman Warrior*, “official literary visibility” (Li 1998: 45-46).

In 1982, Elaine Kim’s pioneering study of Asian American literature examined the “creative writings in English by Americans of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Filipino descent.” For Kim, the shift from the term, “Oriental” to “Asian American” made these American identities “more precise” and “more objective” (Kim 1982: xii). She was attempting to *unite* Asian American voices, in the hopes that it would lead to effective community organization across domains and sectors within the United States. However, her attempt at “unity” simultaneously excluded South and most Southeast Asian Americans, which consequently has been subject to critical scrutiny, a generation later, by Asian American literary theorists.<sup>5</sup>

A more forgiving reading of this anthology is that Kim’s examination was based on the particularities of Asian American “experience” and attempted to include as many voices as possible in the emerging canon of minority literatures. Obviously influenced, at the time, by the larger discourses in women’s studies and African

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<sup>5</sup> See Ty, Eleanor and Donald C. Goellnicht (Eds). *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; Davis, Rocío G. and Sue-Im Lee (Eds). 2006. *Literary Gestures: The Aesthetic in Asian American Writing*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

American studies concerning “giving voice” to those who had been silenced, Kim’s critical study allowed Asian Americans “self-expression” in order to counter existing stereotypes that circulated in the dominant culture. It also gave academic legitimacy to a long struggle, led by writers and filmmakers, to “give voice” to Asian North Americans in the wake of the long history of exclusion in American history.

In retrospect, both anthologies reflected the political impetus evident at the beginning of Asian American studies in the United States in the early 1970s. Moving beyond a distinct body of knowledge, theoretical paradigms, and literature, the ‘institutionalization’ of Asian American Studies in universities and colleges across the United States allowed for the development of political alliances across ethnic American identities with members of the wider community. Consequently, during the period between 1973 and 1982, the Asian American pan-ethnic coalition served two major functions: first, as an effective organizational strategy across racial, ethnic and class lines, and second, as a response to the “institutionally relevant ethnic categories in the [American] political system” (Espiritu 1997: 10). In its initial stage, English-speaking, American-born, students of Chinese and Japanese descent dominated the movement, and there was considerable effort to distinguish *Asian American Studies* from *Asian Studies* as part of the strategy of “claiming America.” Critics charged their approach was quite anti-immigrant, as exemplified by Chin and company, while feminists were critical of the patriarchal structure of gender relations within and outside the *culturally nationalist* movement. Over time, the coalition has broadened their membership to include Asian immigrants from all walks of life, as well as crossing economic lines to join the well-to-do or successful Asians with refugees, and domestic and factory workers with professionals. Differences in many

ways were deliberately obscured in order to highlight the unifying sense of exclusion, marginalization, and otherness from the mainstream that Asians in America felt.

Between the late 1980s and early 1990s, the sense of otherness was frequently conceptualized as the space “*between worlds*.” Often the vantage point would be between “*countries of origin*” and “*adopted homelands*,” and further extended to include a “*metaphorical space*” between marriage and divorce, between life and death, or between war and peace. Since the 1990s, however, there has been a shift in the way critics approach the question of Asian American identity. As exemplified in the work of Lisa Lowe, there is greater recognition and acceptance of heterogeneity within Asian America, and striving to find a delicate balance between an “identity politics” based on “strategic essentialism” to seek out political unity of diverse intra-ethnic Asian groups, and sensitivity of those differences from within and outside of the political coalition/alliance. Lowe writes, “essentializing Asian American identity and suppressing our differences—of national origin, generation, gender, party, class—risks particular dangers:...it inadvertently supports the racist discourse that constructs Asians as a homogeneous group, that implies we are “all alike” and conform to “types”” (Lowe 1996: 30). Rejecting both nationalist/nativist and assimilationist models of Asian American subjectivity, Lowe champions instead “interventions that refuse static or binary conceptions of ethnicity, replacing notions of identity with multiplicity and shifting the emphasis from ethnic ‘essence’ to cultural hybridity” (Lowe 1996: 33).

*Kyop’o* women are in a unique position to critique the increasingly multiracial, multiethnic, and multiple landscapes that unify and challenge the collective identifications to a nation-state. Whereas theorists like Benedict Anderson (2006) have examined the creation and processes behind the

global spread of 'imagined communities' of nationality, others have wrestled with the more nuanced and experiential/experimental modes of representation of cultural history and memory that convey a sense of "otherness." Drawing from this rich body of scholarship on cultural otherness and marginalization, there is a sense of loss and remembering that is very compelling and peculiar to the cinematic practices of *kyop'o* women filmmakers residing in the United States and Canada. Each offers a unique perspective along the margins and borders of the multicultural nation-state whether it is a critique of the *model minority* myth, the U.S. occupation of Korea, the racialization of immigrant labour, or the racialization and inscription of the Asian female body. However, I also contend they are *unified* in their understanding of the limits of the multicultural nation-state by probing in the "in-between" of the racialized structures of North American society and the gendered patriarchal structures of Korean society.

The historical backdrop to their cinematic and visual texts often involves diachronic memories, or references to different waves of Korean immigration to the United States and Canada. To a certain extent, these different flows of people over the past century and a half have shaped their 'collective' psyche to include stories about 'picture brides' who migrated to Hawaii between 1903 and 1924 as migrant laborers in sugar plantations during the first wave of immigration to the United States. The second wave of immigration, which marked the end of the Korean War, consisted of the steady flow of War Brides and adopted children of U.S. military personnel. And finally, the third wave began with the Immigration Act of 1965, which removed "national origins" as the basis for American immigration policy.<sup>6</sup>

Within the U.S. context, the history and experience of exclusion is unique for Korean immigrants, though similarly shared with other Asian-origin groups like the

Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos.<sup>7</sup> Scholars such as Ronald Takaki and Lisa Lowe have traced an "exclusionist" history of Asians in the United States. Key dates include the 1790 Naturalization Law, which aimed to protect the national citizenry and national culture from "foreign" and "racial" corruptions, followed by successive exclusions of the Chinese in 1882, Asian Indians in 1917, Koreans and Japanese in 1924, and Filipinos in 1934. Furthermore, the Alien Land Laws of 1913, 1920, and 1923 prohibited Asian immigrants from owning land and other forms of property through the legal construction of nonwhites as "aliens ineligible to citizenship."

In Canada, immigration laws followed a similar racial pattern as exemplified in the Canadian government's treatment of Chinese laborers. The transcontinental railway was built chiefly on the labour of 6,500 Chinese men specifically imported for this job, many of whom died in the process. When the railway was finished in 1885, Chinese labour was no longer needed, and between 1878 and 1899 the British Columbia legislature passed over twenty-six bills aimed at preventing or restricting the settlement of Asians (Mackey 2002: 33). During the Second World War, Japanese Canadians were also subject to the exclusionary policies of

<sup>6</sup> For further information on the immigration and settlement patterns of Koreans in the United States, please refer to Yoon, In-Jin. (2006). "Understanding the Korean Diaspora from Comparative Perspectives." In *Conference Proceedings for the Asia Culture Forum—Transformation and Prospect toward Multiethnic, Multiracial and Multicultural Society: Enhancing Intercultural Communication*. Gwangju City, South Korea: 1-21.

<sup>7</sup> Another unique feature is the history of colonization by Japan during 1910 and 1945, U.S. occupation of Korea after the Korean War (1950–1953), and the division between North and South Korea along the DMZ, or demilitarized zone. These historical facts, I argue, represent important "cultural memories" of war, occupation, and displacement that haunt the Korean diaspora, and are addressed in the video work of Yunah Hong and text by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha.

internment and were forced to forfeit their property.

Korean immigration to Canada shared similar patterns to the U.S. in that missionaries played a mediating role between Korea and Canada. They were critical in providing educational, medical, and social services to Koreans in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. During that time, Koreans were subject to poverty and oppression under intensifying Japanese colonial rule. As Yoon (2006) argues, Christianity gave comfort and hope among the alienated classes and women while many Korean elites were educated in private Christian schools. During the early 1900s, prospective “native” leaders were sent to Canada, where they would be educated in the Canadian system and then return to the mission field. However, between 1938 and 1945, no Korean students entered Canada. At the end of World War II, increasing numbers of Koreans entered Canada as missionary scholarship students. While most of the students moved to the United States to seek higher education, others returned to Korea after having completed their education and training. Prior to the 1960s, early Korean immigrants to Canada mainly consisted of church ministers, medical doctors, and scholars. This is in sharp contrast to the post-1965 immigrants who entered the country for permanent residence. Figures indicate that between 1970 and 1980, 18,148 Koreans immigrated to Canada while 17,483 joined the immigration stream between 1981 and 1990. After the 1997 foreign currency crisis in Korea, immigration grew more rapidly, which resulted in an increase of 53,326 between 1991 and 2001.

Based on this brief historical overview of Koreans in North America, and their history of exclusion, there’s a sense that “Asian” consciousness only begins to eclipse American and Canadian consciousness in the context of white racism, and particularly as experienced in the diaspora. Thus, it is plausible to argue these *kyop’o*

filmmakers are engaged in a line of critique that challenges the strong assimilationist or ‘melting pot’ ideology to “Americanize” the racial and ethnic cultures within its national boundary. Their interstitial position between a homeland given up and a new one forged—between a “back then” and a “here now” that make for tongue-tying experiences—hinge on the salient connection between (im)migration, memory, language and identity. This, I would argue, is the “third space”—or alternative space from which they engage in social critique. As relatively recent immigrants to the United States, racial, ethnic, class, and gender identifications shape the stories that spill over into their immigrant subjectivities. The fact that their stories are couched within and complicated by the deep layers of competing Asian American discourses and larger mainstream discourses on race, sexuality and class in America warrants an investigation on the diverse range of *kyop’o* experiences in a multicultural, though racially stratified America.

Now the question that comes up is: “What is so important about *kyop’o* women’s cinema? And why is it even relevant?” I can only speak for myself. Their stories touch me in ways that are deeply personal and visceral: they allow me to identify with things from my past, such as the accented speech that I heard my parents speak, and especially, the musicality of *Hangul* of my mother’s intonation and inflection. In particular, what I remember vividly is the mix between Korean and English I heard as a child, and the different types of English spoken in different social spaces: at home, at school, and elsewhere. I also remember feeling conflicted when I corrected my parents’ speech or helped them interpret ‘official’ documents. But these are the experiences that are apart of me, and they have shaped how I view the films and videos by *kyop’o* women, especially the documentary work of Sun-Kyung Yi and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson<sup>8</sup> in their nuanced attention to

spoken language and how it is filmed in relation to the speaking Korean female subject(s).

The films and videos by *kyop'o* women also offer insight into a "history" that I really never knew first-hand; yet, they connect me to a place that I could only imagine through the stories of my childhood and that of my parents. Their cinematic stories are worth listening to, because they have not been heard before. And each one is different from the next, which only demonstrates the richness and complexity of our everyday lives and the multiplicity of experiences. Neither story is authoritative; rather, each one explores different aspects of the diasporic experience and seeks to enrich the stockpile of cultural knowledge as a source of empowerment. Telling one's story affirms our sense of being, and knowledge of (one's) history is that pathway to enlightenment and open-mindedness.

On many different levels, the work of *kyop'o* women filmmakers and visual artists focus on articulating location and position. But, they do so in creative ways that incorporate their "particularity" around language, memory, and the body. They speak from the standpoint of "I" yet, they invite each other (including the spectator) to a collective "We" that challenges the relations of inequality that constitute our social locations, and cut across different communities of colour. As the eldest daughter of Korean immigrants, I identify with the strong undercurrents of pain, disorientation, and glaring self-introspection of their work. If there is something that unifies their work,

<sup>8</sup> For Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, see *Sa-I-Gu: From Korean Women's Perspectives*. Christine Choy, Elaine Kim and Dai Sil Kim-Gibson, 1993, 36 mins., video. NAATA: 326 Ninth Street, Second Floor, San Francisco, CA 94103.

<sup>9</sup> Gala Presentation of *Night Passage* (dir. Trinh T. Minh-ha). *Art Star 3 Video Art Biennial*. SAW Gallery in collaboration with the National Gallery of Canada. October 4-14, 2007. Ottawa, Canada.

it is the subtle undercurrent of self-formation or 'sense-making' of that self that is both exhilarating and terrifying. In writing about independent *kyop'o* women's cinema, I've recovered (and even discovered) different aspects of myself by identifying with these different and not-so-mainstream images. And incidentally, seeing images that were largely absent from the mainstream or represented in a different light only reaffirms the need to challenge its single-mindedness and paucity of alternatives. It is my hope that projects like this will begin a conversation and draw attention to this emerging body of work, and encourage readers-spectators "to listen carefully with their eyes and see with their ears" in the words of Trinh T. Minh-ha at a 2007 film screening in Ottawa, Canada.

### III.

#### **Auto-**

*a combining form meaning "self," "same," "spontaneous," used in the formation of compound words. [Origin: < Gk, comb. form of autós self]*

#### **Ethno-**

*a combining form meaning "race," "culture," "people," used in the formation of compound words. [Origin: < Gk, comb. form of éthnos]*

#### **Autoethnography-**

*A recognised qualitative social research method where the researcher documents a group by recording his or her own individual experience as it relates to social history. Often, but not always, the researcher is a member of the group in question rather than the traditional outsider ethnographer.*

In many ways, my own viewing and interpretation of the films and videos by select *kyop'o* women filmmakers and artists



extends this notion of “heterogeneity” by focusing on the differences *within* a cultural group—in particular, Korean American and Korean Canadian female artists/filmmakers, whose identities are caught in the interstices of gender, race/ethnicity, and class. However, as I’ve delved into the theoretical significance of writing from my own standpoint, especially in relation to my personal memories, I’ve discovered that my journey to voice has been mediated by the activity of writing from a personal space. Consequently, this self-reflexive journey has been *informed by* and *informed* my approach to the literature that I read and the issues I continue to think about. Trinh T. Minh-ha (1989) has described this subject position as the “triple bind” and deftly connects this to the politics of cultural representation. As I’ve discovered, I share this bind with my *kyop’o* sisters along with the community of women of colour writers and artists. If there is an image that my projects attempts to convey, it is that of a *refracted prism* through which we may see differences in the light, held together by a transparent structure. Some would argue that film and video are “screens” and “mirrors” of a displaced subjectivity, but I would argue they are “embodied structures” of voice. They allowed me to imagine and recreate a “voice” that I haven’t heard in a long while as well as given me the strength and confidence to forge one that is distinctly my own.

From the very start when I thought of the research topic, I wanted to do something different and focus on the key texts or lines of research that I have returned to repeatedly that have shaped who I am and how I think. Nurtured by the strong oral tradition of my family’s personal stories and testimonials of diverse feminist writers such as bell hooks and Cecilia Rodríguez Milanés, my project on *kyop’o* women’s cinema and diasporic cultural production in general is informed by a method that I call, *autoethnographic cultural criticism*.

It’s about situating the writer/researcher within the context of the subject s/he studies, and demonstrating how they are mutually intertwined within the larger social context of history. As it applies to my approach to *kyop’o* cultural production, the consequence has been to confront some of the biases, preferences, and blind spots of my selective reading, and wherever possible, to establish links with my own personal experience in order to develop an organic approach to the literature. It also entails putting into force the notion of *haptic (or tactile) visuality*, which invites the viewer/reader to respond to images in an intimate, embodied way. As Laura U. Marks (2000) contends, such an approach to intercultural cinema facilitates the experience of other sensory impressions such as touch, smell, and taste through an appeal to non-visual knowledge. It is arguably, at this point, that memory and the creative act of invention and imagination on the part of the artist/writer intersect and propel this relationship forward with the viewer/reader.

Equally informative is the notion of *bodily writing* that captures the work of diverse writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha—writers, who have nurtured my soul and sense of community through their adept attention to voice and identity, and the activity of cultural production to nourish their development. If, as their writings suggest, the *written body* is the metaphor of the *written page*, then it is possible to claim that diasporic cultural production, as exemplified in the work of *kyop’o* women filmmakers/artists, extends the activity of cultural production as a critical form of self-expression.

Thinking back on the different sets of issues which have preoccupied me, I’m struck by the intimate connection between ‘the personal’ and ‘the political.’ Weaving back and forth between memories of the past and tying this to a visceral search for

some kind of connection with other women from the Korean diaspora, my journey engaged the ‘sociological imagination.’ Searching for a voice that could perhaps fill my mother’s absence, I instead discovered a wellspring of voices within the Korean diaspora and among racial and ethnic communities. These different voices spoke to my complex yearning and desire for community and belonging. Whereas with my *kyop’o* sisters I recognize the impact of our common features and traces of our cultural heritage, I also realized our connection was not based on birthright or citizenship *per se*. Our connection and sense of solidarity is based on the grounds of social justice and oppositional politics that crosses racial and ethnic boundaries with other ‘women of colour.’

It opened my eyes to a new body of images associated with the Asian female, and which resonated with a sense of cultural identification. It also introduced me to a new body of scholarship focused on the intersections between race, ethnicity, class, and gender—and the power of *racialization* to thread these constructs together as ‘lived reality’ for many *racialized immigrant women* in the United States and Canada. In some ways, I listened to the voices of other *kyop’o* women and discovered our shared differences: whether born in North America or choosing it as your adoptive home, you’re racialized as a ‘cultural other’ against the national project.

What I learnt from the cinematic stories of *kyop’o* women is that each of us speaks from a different position and location, and through different means (or visual formats), to engage each other. Some of us chose to “document” the perils and pain of our (parents’) immigrant subjectivities, a.k.a. the *model minority* myth, or our deeply conscious relationship to our bodies and physical features. Others chose to delve into more poetic and experimental meditations on recovering the ‘traces’ and ‘roots’ of our cultural heritage. Together,

however, they pushed to the forefront our “symbolic” connections to Korea and the deeply layered connections we have toward language. Under the historical movement of time, and across geographical landscapes, our “site of memory” that Toni Morrison (1990) describes as the nexus between memory and imagination (or recollection) that tap into the “unwritten interior life,” is marked by our complex and tenuous relationship to *Hangul*, or the Korean language. For the diasporic Korean, the historical traces of Japanese colonization, war and civil unrest, and American neo-colonialism inflect our hybridized speech. This would include the pidgin’ English spoken in the adoptive land of the (neo)colonial masters, or the spoken Korean, which was silenced or restricted to the family hearth during the period of Japanese colonization.

Turning to my formative childhood experiences, there were hardly any positive signifiers of my racial and ethnic background. Hollywood popular culture made it all too easy to dismiss any strong identification with “Korean-ness.” I was surrounded by images that were different from me. Seldom did I see Asians on screen, and when I did, they were often stereotypical portraits of men and women speaking pidgin’ English or speaking a language totally foreign to me. Their gestures and facial expressions were far too exaggerated to be real—almost comical, and yet, they were uncannily real to me. Although there was some semblance to the English spoken by my parents, I learnt very quickly and quite painfully that it was a negative caricature of not measuring up to an implicit “white” standard.

These feelings of alienation and exclusion, however, were also coupled by a facile belief that my ‘cultural difference’ did not matter. As a child of Canadian multiculturalism, I grew up with an “official” discourse that embraced the ‘song, food, and dance’ of my cultural heritage based on the top-down policies and programs of the Ca-

nadian state. I still remember those after-school heritage language classes I took back in the 1970s and early 1980s. Such maneuvers were intended to embrace cultural diversity, but in reality, served to occlude or deflect critical attention on the *racializing* Canadian political economy. Even today, when we talk about multiculturalism in Canada, it is still a political discourse that relies on a narrow interpretation of culture and ideological constructions of ethnicized and racialized communities: immigrants of colour continued to be distinguished from Francophones, Anglophones, and Aboriginal peoples. The main danger of this ideological construction is that cultural difference is reified, immutable, and contained to cope with the influx of non-European immigrants. Consequently, this mosaic approach fails to address the *racialization* involved in Canadian class formation.

Where I side with my *kyop'o* sisters and 'women of colour' on the other side of the border is on the distinction between antiracism and multiculturalism. Their *oppositional politics* is based on a radical pluralism that seeks to connect "race relations" with antiracism. There is a shift from a 'language of colour' to a 'language based on relations and social location.' This is crucial to my embrace and acceptance of an oppositional identity such as *Asian American woman* or *woman of colour feminist*.

To position oneself intellectually and politically as an Asian American/Korean Canadian feminist is definitely not an easy task. It is an identity that is both unsettling and unsettled (as identities in general often are), but it is also an identity that is often forced to justify itself in front of others. There is nothing inherently wrong about the project of giving an account of oneself toward another. For example, of one's specific location as speaker and thinker; of the complex experiences and perceptions and sense of life that fuel one's concerns; of the reasons, feelings, and anxieties that texture

one's position on an issue; and of the values that inform one's judgment of things.

For Asian women and 'women of colour' in general, however, these others extend well beyond the familiar context of family and ethnic community. They also include middle-class women shackled to "white privilege" who have a vested interest in protecting and maintaining their position in the liberal establishment. The double bind of racism and sexism often forces women of colour to choose sides—either to side with their (Asian) male counterparts and combat racism, or to side with their white sisters and combat patriarchal social practices. It is a hard place to maneuver in and the danger with such dualistic thinking is that loyalty is tied to betrayal. Someone wins because someone loses.

It is tempting to vacillate between an "either/or" choice. Either I am Korean, or I am Canadian. But, I think the whole point to cultural identity is akin to what Stuart Hall (2000) calls a "process of becoming" marked by the instability of constant transformation. Both are destabilized once you start to probe into what constitutes each category. Is it based on birthright, citizenship rights, or the possession of official documents? You slowly begin to realize that how you define them depends on where you are located, and where you are positioned along the axes of history, culture, and power. Thus, becoming Korean Canadian, based on my own experience, yields to the understanding that each is different within and across their categorical distinctions.

The "process of becoming" that Stuart Hall (2000) eloquently writes about in the relationship between cinematic representation and cultural identity involves not a mere recovery of the past. It involves understanding that identities are the names we give to our different positions in relation to the narratives of the past. *Who speaks, what is said, and how is it said*—answers to these questions shape and define

our relationships to cultural identity.

My journey— real or imagined—is shared with my *kyop'o* sisters. My story, like their stories, began with an image and unfolded to reveal the tension between nation and family, history and autobiography, and the ellipses between story and memory. Thus, the counter-memories of the stories, proverbs, songs, and folklore of our “mothers’-tongue” challenge the dominant narrative of world history—which in the North American context often ignores Korea. Through our “mothers’-tongue,” Korea feeds into North America...and we use our imagination and recollections (or memories) to wonder what is fact and what is fiction. This, I have argued, is the “in-between-ness” of immigrant life that is a persistent wound of the diasporic imagination.

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