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# Black and Korean: Racialized Development and the Korean American Subject in Korean/American Fiction

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JEEHYUN LIM

In a recent *PMLA* article, Colleen Lye offers the rhetorical figure of analogy as a way of explaining how the discourse of “Afro-Asian connections” has been constructed.<sup>1</sup> According to her, this figure captures how Asian American experiences in the US have been constructed in relation to black American experiences. The limitation of the Afro-Asian analogy, however, is that, just as much as it can create a notion of “unity” between the two groups by appealing to analogous experiences of exploitation, it can also provoke “antipathy” when the analogy has the effect of arrogating the other (1735). Arguably, these contrastive states of unity and antipathy characterize the two prominent models of comparing Asian and black American experiences: racial solidarity and racial competition. If racial solidarity emphasizes the affinities between Asian and black Americans based on their shared differences from white Americans, racial competition describes these groups’ struggles for resources and advantages at the expense of one another in a racialized society.

Recent scholarship on Afro-Asian relations from both literary studies and the social sciences, however, nuances the uses of analogy considerably.<sup>2</sup> Because of the iconic status of the 1992 LA riots in the media portrayal of Afro-Asian antipathy, scholarship on Afro-Korean relations is arguably well attuned to the pitfalls of drawing easy lines of antipathy, or even unity, between two racialized groups, each marked by its own history of racial violence at home and abroad. Claire Jean Kim’s study of the black-Korean conflict in New York City, for example, avoids the limits of analogy—and its terms of unity and antipathy—through its structuralist approach, as conflicts and hostilities between black Americans and Korean Americans are not analyzed in a social and political vacuum but placed within an existing system of race

relations.<sup>3</sup> Nadia Kim's more recent study of how US neocolonialism in South Korea affects the racial views and attitudes of Korean immigrants in LA extends the geographic scope of Afro-Korean relations to reflect the influence of binational military and commercial exchanges.<sup>4</sup>

Using three Korean and Korean American texts that imagine Afro-Korean relations through the construction, dissemination, and mixing of racial signs—Sök-kyöng Kang's "Days and Dreams," Heinz Insu Fenkl's *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*—I explore a way of accounting for Afro-Korean relations that goes beyond the limits of analogy and extends the structuralist and transnational insights offered by existing scholarship on Afro-Korean relations.<sup>5</sup> At first glance, my cluster of texts may seem an unlikely grouping. Not only do I bring together a Korean writer (Sök-kyöng Kang) and Korean American writers (Heinz Insu Fenkl and Chang-rae Lee), but I also combine two texts that depict US military camp towns in South Korea and, therefore, are thematically aligned—"Days and Dreams" (1983, translated in 1989) and *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (1996)—with a third text, *A Gesture Life* (1999), which is well known to US readers for its topical engagement with comfort women but is thematically disconnected from the first two texts. In terms of where these texts are set, the neocolonial space of US military camp towns in Kang's and Fenkl's texts may seem at a remove from the sanitized picture of the US suburb in Lee's text. Not only are these spaces geographically separated, but their geographic separation is also heightened by their different national territoriality.

Yet I suggest that these texts, read together, reveal Korean American subject formation as fundamentally informed by a trans-Pacific route of migration, which coincides with the route of US military incursions into the Pacific and which—more importantly for my argument—is the route through which ideas of race and the ideology of development travel. Discontiguous spaces such as the military camp towns and the US suburb emerge as spaces on a continuum when viewed through the lens of trans-Pacific traffic in bodies and ideologies. More specifically, these texts create a continuum between the camp towns and the US suburb by revealing that Korean American racialization unfolds in these spaces in direct relationship to black American racialization. The Korean and Korean American characters in Kang's, Fenkl's, and Lee's texts variously embrace or reject black Americans as they learn the symbolic economy of racial signs, a symbolic economy that takes shape as social and economic mobility in the ideology of development is understood in terms of proximity to whiteness and Americanness and as the black-white binary encounters Koreanness as an unfamiliar racial sign. The individual relations of Korean affinity with or disavowal of blackness in the texts may be explained through the terms of unity and antipathy characteristic of existing models of analyzing Afro-Asian relations. But the most compelling aspect of the literary imagining of Afro-Korean relations is that it does not view the relationship between two groups of people, each identified as Korean and black American, as central to Afro-Korean relations.

Rather these texts engage with and reveal an economy of racial signs, which becomes potent in the trans-Pacific route of migration and on which Afro-Korean relations are built. I suggest that the three works of fiction I examine here show the mixing of racial signs of blackness and Koreanness as constitutive of the emergence of a Korean American subjectivity. By shifting the focus of racial contact from interactions between differently racialized persons or groups to an interrogation of race as signs of value constructed in the trans-Pacific circuit of labor and material goods, I intend to show that Korean American subject formation is embedded in larger currents of what I call “racialized development.”

The model of Korean American formation I present here does not negate the diversity of Korean American experiences. Needless to say, not all texts classified as Korean American depict Afro-Korean relations, and many of them portray immigrant lives as heavily influenced by the immigrant’s relationship to the homeland or to the home culture but not necessarily related to black Americans. Arguably, the most prominent model of Korean American formation has been to view it as analogous to other Asian immigrant formations while being defined by the particular historical and social context of US–Korean relations. Elaine H. Kim’s statement that “although Korean American writing emerges from conditions shared by other Asian American groups, it is also rooted in the particularities of Korean American social history” is typical of such a model of Korean American formation.<sup>6</sup> My focus is slightly different in that I am interested in problematizing the often taken-for-granted categories of “Korean” and “American” in the construction of “Korean American” through the space of the trans-Pacific. Whereas the dominant model of Korean American formation may be based on the idea of Korean singularity (or exceptionality, if I may) and look for unique manifestations of Koreanness, I posit a model of Korean American formation that is by nature relational.

My examination of Korean American subject formation in this article is primarily based on the period between the 1960s and the 1990s.<sup>7</sup> Kang’s “Days and Dreams” and Fenkl’s *Memories of My Ghost Brother* show life in US military camp towns in South Korea from the 1960s through the 1980s. In South Korean history, this is a period of tumultuous nation-building after the Korean War.<sup>8</sup> The present of *A Gesture Life* is the 1990s, although the story of Hata’s settlement in an upstate New York suburb after the Pacific War includes a larger swath of the post–civil rights era. My aim in looking at the temporality of Korean American subject formation from both the South Korean and US perspectives is twofold. The first is to bring into high relief the fact that the Korean American subject comes into being against the backdrop of heavy South Korean dependency on the US. The second is to claim that the racialization of the Korean American subject needs to be understood through the circulation of racial signs, which originate in the US but are adapted in South Korea at a time of state-led economic development before being fed back into the US. In contrast to an import–export model of understanding how ideas travel, this

circulation model allows one to view these ideas as neither fixed nor static but constantly unmade and remade.

The Korean American subject emerges obliquely in “Days and Dreams” and *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, both examples of “camp town literature,” “which exclusively deals with military prostitution for U.S. servicemen.”<sup>9</sup> Building on the work of scholars who have analyzed camp towns as exemplary transnational sites where questions of territorial ownership or national sovereignty fade into the background of military and economic domination, I examine Kang’s and Fenkl’s representations of camp towns as sites where the black-white binary clashes with a third term that does not neatly fit into the binary and locate the muted expression of nascent Korean American subject formation in this context. Koreanness is an outcast sign that is exterior to the black-white binary and inferior to Americanness, as can be seen succinctly in the proxy racialization of Korean women as white or black based on whom they bed. For the women of camp towns, crossing the two national signs of “Korean” and “American” is intrinsically a racial act even as their Koreanness is suppressed in their proxy racialization according to a US racial binary.

Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, a novel that Belinda Kong suggests has come to be viewed as “an exemplary transnational Asian American text,” places racial hybridization at the heart of the Korean American subject.<sup>10</sup> I examine the novel’s transnationalism not in its portrayal of comfort women but in its engagement with a transnational adoption market, which connects a peaceful and quiet US suburb to the camp towns in South Korea.<sup>11</sup> The main character, Franklin Hata, a Korean Japanese who immigrates to the US after the Pacific War, and his mixed-race Korean adoptee daughter, Sunny, struggle to relate to each other and to find their place in the community they live in, a struggle that I suggest is due to the complex economy of racial signs in their migratory paths. I trace Hata’s prejudices against black and Korean racial signs in light of the post-Korean War adoption market in South Korea and the racialization of Asians as model minority in the post-civil rights era US to show how blackness becomes a reminder of Korean abjection in the formation of the Korean American subject.

### **Black and Korean in Literary Camp Towns**

The vulnerability of those who work and live in camp towns and their interstitial existence are captured well in both Fenkl’s and Kang’s texts. Fenkl’s *Memories of My Ghost Brother* chronicles the experience of a biracial Korean boy who grows up in a camp town—Tatagumi in Pupyong—in the 1960s and early 1970s with a US serviceman father, who is a German immigrant himself, and a Korean mother.<sup>12</sup> Insu’s mother works as a black marketer and associates with the circle of Korean women who work at clubs for US servicemen. Living with his mother and her relatives while his father completes several rounds of duty in Vietnam, Insu comes to know the streets and people of the camp town thoroughly. While Fenkl’s text offers the

viewpoint of a young boy, Kang's "Days and Dreams" shows the everyday lives of camp town women through the eyes of a sex worker, Baek.<sup>13</sup> The plot of the short story revolves around the unsuccessful relationships of Baek and another sex worker, Sun-ja. Baek's short-term contract relationship with Overton, a white GI, is in turmoil throughout the story and ends predictably with the GI's departure. Against this relationship is set the lesbian relationship of Sun-ja and Barbara, a black American servicewoman, which starts off as promising but comes to a premature end with Sun-ja's abrupt death in an accident.

In "Days and Dreams," Baek characterizes the camp town she lives in as "an island between Korea and the U.S."<sup>14</sup> Despite its whiff of romanticism, this metaphor is echoed by many writers and scholars who view camp towns as existing in between nation-states. Fenkl, for example, says that the camp town he grew up in was "a liminal space between the U.S. military installation and the Korean town."<sup>15</sup> This liminality is anything but an innocent construction since camp towns are a "necessary evil," as historian Ji-Yeon Yuh terms it, for both the Korean and the US state.<sup>16</sup> For the Korean state, camp towns function as "buffer zones that prevent U.S. soldiers from entering Korean society and prohibit ordinary Koreans, especially 'respectable' Korean women, from interacting with U.S. men."<sup>17</sup> As buffer zones, camp towns are cast outside the normative national space as "foreign spaces."<sup>18</sup> From the perspective of the US military, the sex industry of camp towns sets regional boundaries to the sexual activities of US servicemen and decreases the possibility of troublesome contact between the servicemen and Korean civilians.<sup>19</sup>

Unduly burdened with social problems of prostitution and violence in their function to contain the threats to the stability of the nation-states, camp towns, however, become optimal sites for race relations that are considered anomalous in the national spaces to unfold. In Fenkl's and Kang's texts, the social relations of camp towns are structured by a racial binary of black and white with Korean being an uncertain third term at times. While the ideology of white supremacy places black Americans in a category of abjection in comparison to white Americans, the privilege of being an American still makes the black American a desirable partner to Koreans. A geography of segregation is first noticeable in the racial landscape of the camp town and the spatial ordering of the residents. In their reportage of military prostitution in Asia, Sandra Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus address the issue of segregated bars and clubs for black and white GIs in camp towns. For them this is a transplantation of US racism into Asia.<sup>20</sup> A camp town in South Korea, for example, has an area that serves black GIs called the DMZ. A pun on the Demilitarized Zone, the initials in this case stand for "Dark Man's Zone" (178). The existence of a distinctly American color line can also be seen succinctly in Fenkl's representation of the racial dynamics on a bus that Insu rides to go to American school at the Yongsan US military base in Seoul. The white GIs are in the front of the bus whereas "four Korean women with their children whom they were taking to school, two KATUSAs, a red-haired man in civilian clothes, and all the Black GIs" sit in the back.<sup>21</sup> A racist exclamation by a white GI

when Insu's friend James and his mother get off the bus shows that this color line is meant to distinguish whites from nonwhites: "What a fuckin' whale. . . . Mama whale and baby coon."<sup>22</sup> The racist statement denies the biracial heritage of James who is half-black and half-Korean while placing Koreanness and blackness on the same social plane of inferiority to whites. An undifferentiated sense of nonwhiteness knits the diverse group of people seated in the back of the bus into one group.

While the white GI's logic used to categorize James as black is reminiscent of the logic of the notorious one-drop rule in the US, which constructed an arbitrary category of race around heritage, the color line of the bus notably differs from the color line of American Jim Crow in its placement of Asian in relation to black and white in public space. In his famous dissent in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), Justice Harlan argued against separate train cars for black and white Americans, using the fact that the Chinese were allowed in the same cars as whites when they were "a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States."<sup>23</sup> Whereas such an understanding of Asians as fundamentally foreign yet unthreatening to white privilege permeates the racialization of Asians in the US, the racial dynamics of the camp town in Korea establishes a clear distinction between Koreans and white Americans while blurring that between Koreans and black Americans.

Such a structure of white supremacy creates room for what critic Jin-Kyung Lee calls "trans-racial class alliances" between black Americans and Koreans in camp towns.<sup>24</sup> In Fenkl's narrative, Insu's reflection on his position in relation to both white and black GIs suggests the moral grounds for such alliances. When he visits his father at the US Army base and observes him with his white friends, Insu says, "I could not imagine how I would ever understand their secret language of knowing glances and inside jokes. That was something that only yellow-haired soldiers could do. I would forever be tainted by a Koreanness that would make the words 'gook' or 'dink' sound strange coming from my lips, like the word 'nigger' spoken by a Black GI to anyone but his brothers."<sup>25</sup> Under the racial logic of the US military, Insu cannot but view his racial identity as a permanent and inflexible sign. He notes that the racial slurs that distance the white GIs from Koreans or blacks have the effect of creating in-group solidarity. While South Korea participated officially as a US ally and unofficially as a mercenary army in the Vietnam War, the status of Koreans as allies is jeopardized by their inferior racial status in the above passage.<sup>26</sup> Their racialization as "gook," a term most frequently used in reference to the Vietnamese at this time when the Vietnam War is the main stressor for the US military, points to the easy slippage of Koreans from allies to enemies.<sup>27</sup> Instead of trying to extricate himself from an externally imposed racial identification, Insu embraces the possibilities of horizontal camaraderie of his racialized position. His interactions with his half-black friend James and black GIs in the narrative show his understanding that the racism directed toward blackness can always translate into racism toward himself as a mixed-race Korean and racial other to white Americans.

Yet black American as at once a sign of privilege and abjection complicates this color line of white versus nonwhite, as well as alliances between black Americans and Koreans. Both Fenkl and Kang address this point by showing the proxy racialization of Korean women as black or white based on whom they bed.<sup>28</sup> A female sex worker in Fenkl's narrative, Chang-mi's mother, says to a rookie fellow sex worker, "you have to decide, before you start, whether you're going to date the Black or White GIs. They won't let you date both."<sup>29</sup> This statement shows how the logic of black-white segregation does not stop at creating spatial boundaries that are racialized but goes further to racialize the Korean women who have sexual relationships with American men, black and white. Fenkl's use of an unidentified referent "they" to designate the source of authority over interracial sexual relations is revealing of the lack of control the military sex workers feel over their work and lives. The ambiguity of "they" is also apt in that it is impossible to pinpoint the agent of racial segregation in camp towns. While unwritten rules and norms of segregation originating from the views and attitudes of US servicemen create bars, clubs, and sex workers that cater exclusively to either white or black GIs, Korean women in the sex industry also internalize and reproduce these rules and norms to varying degrees as can be seen in the camp town narratives.

While Chang-mi's mother presents the choice of whether to date black or white GIs as something one cannot undo, the narrator of "Days and Dreams," Baek, is someone who crosses this color line. Recalling her previous years working at bars and clubs exclusively for black GIs, Baek refers to herself as a "black prostitute" and others as "white prostitutes."<sup>30</sup> Such phrasing powerfully conveys the force of proxy racialization felt by the Korean women. Baek's Koreanness becomes a blank slate on which a "black" or "white" racial signification is written. The racialization that occurs in these interracial sexual relationships feminizes and subsequently erases the racial significance of Koreanness. In the Korean women's cases, Korean racialization equals an erasure of Korean into the terms of black or white American as no hyphenated signification is readily available.

Interestingly, both Fenkl's and Kang's texts present black Americans as potential rescuers of Korean women desperately pursuing the American Dream in camp towns. The explanation that Chang-mi's mother offers as to why she married a black GI in *Memories of My Ghost Brother* may well disclose the compatibility of a black-Korean sexual alliance in camp town.<sup>31</sup> "He's a kind man," she says, "I can't imagine I would find anyone better than him."<sup>32</sup> This coupled with her assertion that "Black men are much nicer to women [than white men]" reveals both a contented acknowledgment of her state of marriage and an understanding of the workings of the marriage market for camp town sex workers (210). Unmistakably embedded in her profession of her husband's kindness, however, is the sex worker's awareness of her vulnerable position as someone in need of and on the receiving end of such kindness, which, in turn, highlights the role of the black American as a rescuer.



“Days and Dreams” is unique in its imagining of a black-Korean alliance that is nonheteronormative and, therefore, eschews the norms of proxy racialization that have been developed on the assumption of heterosexual relations between American GIs and Korean women. The camp town culture at large in “Days and Dreams” is adamantly heteronormative, as can be seen in Baek’s statement that “I wanted to be a woman who wanted a man—that was the natural thing to do.”<sup>33</sup> Narrated through Baek, the relationship that develops between Sun-ja, a quiet and plain woman who desperately wants to go to the US, and Barbara appears to be tainted by commercialism and mercenary interests that constrict life in camp town. While news of Barbara’s generous gifts to Sun-ja and Sun-ja’s impending departure to the US spark considerable envy and curiosity among the female sex workers, Baek considers Sun-ja’s fate as ultimately no better than that of Mi-ra, another sex worker who is gruesomely murdered by her Korean boyfriend/pimp. Sun-ja’s tragic fall to death in a poorly maintained club building propels Baek to reflect on the previously unknown details of Sun-ja’s past life and to conclude that “her rude, ignorant life was the reason Sun-ja had this wild dream about going to America.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite its moralism toward Sun-ja’s mercenary interest in her black American lover, “Days and Dreams” revises the common trope of “rescue and reform” in Korean camp town narratives, in which camp town women are often objects of rescue and reform by patriarchal authority.<sup>35</sup> A rather melodramatic letter from Barbara to Sun-ja, which Baek opens after Sun-ja’s death, contains the following message: “I love you and your agony. I hope I can be your savior. Think of our meeting as a blessing and please plan for our future.”<sup>36</sup> While Barbara’s reference to herself as a savior indexes the divide in the social positions of Barbara and Sun-ja, her statement that she “love[s] you and your agony” can be understood in the context of an earlier conversation among camp town sex workers in the “Monkey House” (the prison-like facility sex workers are kept in when routine health examinations show that they have venereal diseases) on possible common ground between Barbara and the Korean sex workers. Amid many declarations of heterosexuality as the sexual norm, the Korean sex worker Toma voices the opinion that, as marginalized people, they have much in common with lesbians: “If two women see eye to eye, there’s no law that says they can’t live together. So what if they’re lesbians? People live the way they want to. And so what if we’re whores? Except for worrying about money, it’s great living around the base” (11). This possibility of “see[ing] eye to eye,” which hints at a Korean American formation where Koreanness and Americanness are on equal terms, makes Barbara and Sun-ja’s relationship different from other black-Korean alliances in camp town narratives.

All in all, however, the crossings between the signs of Koreanness and Americanness in these texts do not bespeak a balanced mixing of the two. If the suppression of Koreanness in Korean women’s proxy racialization pushes the women to identify with an American racial binary, the fate of mixed-race black Korean children born in camp towns is likewise dependent on this racial binary. A piercing

critique of the demoralizing effects of a binary racial outlook on the Korean residents of camp towns comes in the trope of child killing and its horror in *Memories of My Ghost Brother*. Insu learns about the death of his half-black friend James when he eavesdrops on a conversation among his mother and her friends who work at clubs for US servicemen. The circumstances of James's death in a drowning accident—especially the mention of his mother remarrying a white GI—leave so much doubt in Insu's mind that he tries to confirm his suspicions of what happened through his worldly uncle. Pressed by Insu, the uncle offers a hypothetical scenario, which starkly lays out the possible violence in the Korean women's calculated alliances with American men:

You're a dungwhore and you catch yourself a GI by getting pregnant with his brat, but then he goes off to Vietnam and gets himself killed. That leaves you with benefits from the great Emperor of America, but now you have a Black brat to feed, and it's not enough money. So now you want another GI husband to start things over—maybe a white guy with a higher rank, *ungh?*—but who would marry a whore with a Black kid? . . . Maybe she was trying to scrub the color off and she held his face down in the washbasin too long.<sup>37</sup>

As an older narrator looking back on his childhood, Insu cynically marvels at the “pragmatic” quality of the Korean women's “balancing act,” “bartering sons for their own welfare” (232). He is reminded of Chang-mi's mother's scheme to have a half-black child by a random black GI, unbeknownst to her infertile husband, to consolidate her marriage, which, in his mind, is just the inverse of what James's mother purports to do. “Women,” he says, “even seemingly devoted mothers—will traffic in children for the mythic promise of America” (232). Insu notes that some women will go to the extreme of erasing every single trace of a previous alliance with black America—to the point of killing their own children—once the utility of that alliance wears out. Heterosexual reproduction makes it impossible to undo Korean women's proxy racialization since it can leave behind an indelible sign of interracial mixing. For Chang-mi's mother, a half-black child would safeguard her attachment to American privilege, even if the child is not her husband's, and for James's mother, James is the sign of an American privilege foreclosed to her. In either case, the black Korean child's Koreanness disappears under the racial sign of American blackness.

If a system of racial signs that is distinctively American guides the sentiments and actions of Koreans in search of the American Dream in Fenkl's and Kang's texts, is it still possible to read these texts as representing a Korean American subject formation? I suggest that it is, although these texts' engagement with Korean American formation should not be viewed through any one character, or characters,

but in the texts' reflections on the racial geopolitics that create the conditions of possibility for the Korean American subject. Ironically, it is neither a Korean woman married to a black American GI nor a mixed-race Korean American who delivers the most succinct insight on Korean American formation but Insu's Korean uncle, a good-for-nothing alcoholic who is hardly connected to the American Dream. When Insu declares that he's "going into the Army" like his father, his uncle initially seems to encourage his identification with his father: "You have to study hard for that [U.S. Military Academy]," he admonishes, "Otherwise, you'll be a grunt just like him. You'll wind up in some no-name country with some war going on and you'll knock up some dark-skinned whore and end up marrying her. You're too sensitive. . . . You're kinder than a black *kkomdungji*."<sup>38</sup> In a bizarre twist of rhetoric, Insu goes from being identified with his father—"a grunt just like him"—to being compared with an anonymous black man. A closer look at this passage, though, reveals a racial logic behind US militarism that prescribes a relation between economic mobility and skin color. Insu's father, in this case, has entered a path of downward mobility by marrying his Korean mother, identified in the uncle's misogynist logic as a "dark-skinned whore." A product of this marriage, Insu is already lower in the social hierarchy than his father, even if he is possibly higher up than his Korean friends by being half-white.

The most notable part of the uncle's statement is the parallel structure between "some no-name country" and "some dark-skinned whore." While the immediate referents here are Korea and Insu's mother, the intentional lack of specificity in the uncle's words suggests that US military ventures into Third World countries are an ongoing phenomenon, a timeless truth. The feminization of the Third World country and the spatialization of the woman of color occur simultaneously in the uncle's phrasing of the racial logic of military domination. Vietnam is superimposed onto Korea as the reader is reminded of the Vietnam War, which is ever present in the background in Fenkl's narrative and which gave rise to numerous Vietnamese sex workers, military brides, and interracial children. In the uncle's estimation, the Korean American formation is undergirded by the racialization of development, which follows US militarism, and "black" and "Korean" become mutually constitutive signs of understanding the political and economic import of this formation.

### **Black and Korean in Asian America**

The Korean American subject, which emerges obliquely in the camp towns of Kang and Fenkl, likewise needs to be teased out in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*, whose main character Hata immigrates to the US to start a new life after serving as a medic in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War.<sup>39</sup> Although Hata is estranged from his adopted daughter Sunny and is haunted by memories of the war—particularly his love affair with a Korean comfort woman, K—the trappings of his

American life as a former owner of a medical supply store and an upstanding citizen of Bedley Run show the experiences of a typical Asian immigrant. Despite the novel's borrowing from the genre of immigrant literature, its portrayal of Korean American formation is still subdued since neither Hata nor Sunny neatly fits the category of Korean American. Hata's Korean heritage remains repressed throughout the novel, only to be communicated to the reader in flashbacks, and the only suggestion of Sunny's relationship to her mixed-race black Korean identity is her socializing with people of color. I submit, though, that the novel can be read as a reflection on Korean American subject formation if the idea of racial hybridization is placed at its center.

Through the character of Hata, Lee shows a racial hierarchy that is not internal to the US. A scathing critique of the racial hierarchy in Japanese imperialist ideology is delivered through the subhuman treatment of Korean comfort women by the Japanese military. Lee comes closest to explaining the racist ideology of Japanese imperialism when he has a Japanese soldier refer to the Korean comfort women as "*chosen-pi*, a base anatomical slur which also denoted her Koreanness."<sup>40</sup> As someone who was born of Korean parents in Japan and then adopted by a well-meaning Japanese couple, Hata's given Korean name is consigned to oblivion and his last name, Oh, comes up only once briefly alongside his new Japanese last name of Kurohata (later shortened to Hata after immigration).<sup>41</sup> The extent to which Hata successfully represses his Korean identity and assimilates into a Japanese identity can be seen in his ability to "pass" as Japanese in the army, as Anne Cheng terms it.<sup>42</sup> In fact, in exchanges like the one between Hata and K, where Hata tries to tell an imprisoned Korean comfort woman that the goal of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, the central ideology of Japanese expansionism, is "to develop an Asian prosperity, and an Asian way of life," it seems as if Hata is not just passing but completely interpellated as a Japanese imperial subject.<sup>43</sup> It is only through his relationship with K during the war and later with Sunny that Hata can maintain a tenuous connection with his Korean heritage. Viewing Hata as a Korean American subject is impossible unless one either employs a rigidly biological notion of Korean American where descent overrides voluntary affiliation or accepts hybridization as intrinsic to the Korean American subject.

Another example of a Korean American subject in the novel, Sunny, cautions against the use of Korean American as a biological category and guides the reader to accept racial hybridization as a constitutive part of Korean American formation.<sup>44</sup> The difficulty Hata has in coming to terms with Sunny's racial identity, which is attributed to his skewed notion of racial kinship, exposes his prejudices. After having patiently gone through the bureaucratic procedure of international adoption, Hata finally meets Sunny, "a skinny, jointy young girl, with thick, wavy black hair and dark-hued skin."<sup>45</sup> The physical description of Sunny is immediately followed in the text by an admission of disappointment from Hata: "I was disappointed initially; the agency had promised a child from a hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family who had

gone down on their luck” (204). If the reader is initially bewildered as to why Hata questions the origin of his adoptee, the unfolding narrative quickly reveals that it is Sunny’s mixed-race background, first referenced through the phrase “dark-hued skin,” that disappoints Hata. While he had engaged in fantasies of biological kinship—“being of a single kind and blood”—with his future child, the mixed-race heritage of Sunny undoes such fantasies for good since “her hair, her skin, were there to see, self-evident, and it was obvious how some other color (or colors) ran deep within her” (204).

Based on his recognition of Sunny’s racial difference, Hata even imagines a scenario of careless sexual encounter between a Korean camp town sex worker and a black American GI as the story of Sunny’s conception. To some extent, he is even more disturbed by the supposed identity of her birth mother than her mixed-race identity. Sunny’s black identity is heightened by the stigma of her mother’s presumed identity as a sex worker for the US military in Hata’s eyes. A distasteful vision of “a night’s wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl” fleets through his mind to contradict what Hata had secretly wished as the origin of his adopted daughter: “a hardworking, if squarely humble, Korean family who had gone down on their luck” (204). Not only is the “black” side of Sunny viewed as undesirable but the “Korean” side of her is also viewed as suspect due to her mother’s dubious sexual morals and presumed lack of a work ethic. As Ji-Yeon Yuh points out in her study of Korean military brides, “the camptown woman became the archetypal ‘fallen woman’” as US military installations became a permanent fixture in the South Korean landscape.<sup>46</sup> Hata’s castigation of Sunny’s blackness is simultaneous with his castigation of her Koreanness, which arguably may have been triggered by the sense of Korean inferiority his upbringing in Japanese wartime ideology instilled in him.

Hata fails to see any common ground between himself and Sunny in the larger context of the Korean diaspora. He does not recognize any similarity between the Korean labor migration to Japan before and during World War II, which presumably may account for his Korean parents’ migration to Japan, and the transnational adoption market that brings Sunny to the US, despite the fact that both point to Korean military and economic dependency on other countries as a possible cause of the Korean diaspora. These routes of migration are also similar in the way they served as circuits for the travel of racial ideas. In fact, the transnational adoption market can be viewed as a device in the novel that succinctly shows the existence of a trans-Pacific route of migration through which not only people but also ideas of race travel.

For all Hata’s surprise at how the adoption agency matched him with a mixed-race black Korean girl, this match is not surprising at all when viewed in the context of how adoption preferences are mediated in the adoption market. As a potential adoptive parent, Hata is not a desirable candidate due to his single status as well as his wish to adopt a girl. Likewise, as a mixed-race black Korean child, Sunny does not fit the mold of a desirable adoptee. Some explanation on the establishment of an

overseas adoption market in Korea may elucidate the place of Sunny in the social and racial hierarchy of this market. Overseas adoption was one of the primary ways in which the state of South Korea handled the social problem of war orphans in general. Mixed-race children in particular were channeled out of the new state, which employed an ideology of nationalism to define Korean citizenry exclusively as being of Korean blood.<sup>47</sup> The patriarchal social and cultural system, which identified a person through the father, created the logic that mixed-race people, most of whom were born of Korean mothers and US military men, should be taken in by the “father’s country.”<sup>48</sup> One of the oldest and most active overseas adoption agencies in South Korea, Holt Adoption Program, for example, was established shortly after the Korean War with the initial intent of finding homes and families for mixed-race Korean children in the US.<sup>49</sup>

While both half-white and half-black Korean children were excluded from citizenship in South Korea, a US racial preference for children with white fathers, as opposed to black, quickly drew a hierarchy among mixed-race children based on their skin color in South Korea. As early as 1962, the idea that half-white Koreans found more social acceptance than half-black Koreans was in circulation.<sup>50</sup> By 1969 Korean government officials and social workers invested in overseas adoption viewed it as a matter of fact that mixed-race white children were much more likely to be adopted by an American family than mixed-race black children.<sup>51</sup> While it is hard to say to what extent such an understanding of US racial preference for whiteness influenced Korean views, it seems that a US racial hierarchy of whites on the top and blacks on the bottom spread quickly in South Korea, a country very much dependent on US aid and goodwill. In this context, it is likely that Sunny, as a child of mixed-black heritage, was placed low on the list of eligible children for US adoption. At the end of *A Gesture Life*, as the grown-up Sunny and Hata work toward reconciliation after a long period of separation, Sunny discloses the circumstances of her adoption: “Before I came to you they had me in a place like this [the hospital where Hata is], but much worse, of course. I know they told you I was at a Christian orphanage, but really it was like a halfway house, I guess. I wasn’t put up for adoption. I was abandoned. I can’t believe you’re surprised. Did you really believe they would give you a wanted child?”<sup>52</sup> In the spatial distinction Sunny makes above, the Christian orphanage implies an aspirant respectability with the orphans as willing and hopeful recipients of Christian benevolence, whereas the halfway house bespeaks unruliness and social castigation. While devoid of racial signification on the surface, the hierarchy of social institutions here reflects the racial hierarchy in the adoption market that relegates Sunny to the social bottom.

Hata’s blindness to the economy of racial signs surrounding transnational adoption may well be a willful blindness based on his desire for middle-class respectability and social acceptance. While Hata may not acknowledge himself as a racialized subject, his becoming a model minority in Bedley Run registers the dominant discourse of Asian racialization in the post-civil rights US. As a place that

grew from a small town, formerly known as Bedleyville in 1963, to a prosperous suburb during the years of Hata's residence, Bedley Run is a latecomer to the waves of suburban development that swept across the country in the postwar era.<sup>53</sup> Hata professes that he chose Bedley Run as the place for his American life because he "had already driven through the more established suburbs nearer to the city and found them distinctly cold, as well as too expensive."<sup>54</sup> The sense of inhospitality Hata feels in the established suburbs corresponds to the racial landscape that suburbanization has created by 1970. As the popular phrase a "chocolate city with vanilla suburbs" indicates, suburbanization resulted in massive degrees of racial segregation making "a largely black central city surrounded by predominantly white suburbs" a norm of housing and urban planning.<sup>55</sup> While he does not feel welcome in the other suburbs he visits, Hata is impressed by how "people took an odd interest in telling me that I wasn't unwelcome" in Bedleyville.<sup>56</sup> The town's ambition to economically grow makes someone like Hata "a positive addition to the census and tax base" (3). Implicit in the welcome extended to Hata is the expectation that he will be what press images of the model minority in the 1960s conveyed: an Asian immigrant who is respectful of authority, hardworking, not prone to make trouble, and therefore capable of reinvigorating such essential American middle-class values as self-help and discipline.<sup>57</sup>

The politics of multiculturalism in Bedley Run permits and encourages the Asian immigrant to assimilate into a model of property ownership. Hata's house, which features prominently throughout the narrative, is the ultimate sign of his successful approximation of a propertied middle-class subject. Both the location and architectural style of Hata's house symbolize the status he has come to attain in Bedley Run. His "Tudor revival" style house is located on "one of the original streets in Bedley Run."<sup>58</sup> Not only does its location suggest the near-native status of its owner but its tasteful vintage style, which allows it to not only maintain but accrue value in a depressed real-estate market, speaks to the owner's ability to navigate the terrain of property ownership. His material success bespeaks his assimilation into the middle-class citizenry of Bedley Run. It even forms the basis of his personal relationships, such as his friendship with Liv Crawford, a real-estate agent keen on persuading Hata to sell his house.

While it may seem as if Hata is fully assimilated into the social and economic life of Bedley Run, his social acceptance is actually contingent on his performing a circumscribed role in the suburban economy. This comes out most succinctly at one moment in the novel in a heated conversation among Hata, Liv, and Renny Banerjee, who is Liv's romantic interest and an immigrant from South Asia. As someone who immigrated to Bedley Run after its growth, Renny's views of the suburban town differ from those of either Hata or Liv. His stories of being called "Third World" at shops and being shunned by mothers with babies in the park register an insurgent nativism and xenophobia in the townspeople's reaction to "perceived 'changes' in the character of the town and the area" (133). Renny sharply criticizes the convenient

amnesia of the residents of Bedley Run who welcomed the immigrants only to turn against them as they become economic competition and a cultural threat in the changed economic climate of the 1990s. “It seems,” he cries out, “everyone has completely forgotten who I am” (133).

Against Renny’s critique, Liv defends the town, using Hata to build her case. Renny’s claim that he is being cast as an outsider cannot be true, according to her, since Hata is the quintessential insider. “Doc Hata is Bedley Run,” she says, “He is what this place is about. Not the doctors and investment bankers and corporate lawyers who have ample cash and want sudden privacy and the airs that go with it” (136). In placing Hata in opposition to the conspicuous display of wealth—the doctors, bankers, and lawyers—Liv alludes to the exemplary life Hata has led as a middle-class citizen of Bedley Run. He operated a small business—Sunny Medical Supply—successfully for years, participated in various local community activities, and meticulously maintains a coveted piece of property in his retirement. As long as the Asian immigrant can shore up and reinvigorate such middle-class values—supposedly under attack by both alien migrant labor from the Third World and the morally suspect upper class with no community ties or investment—Liv says he can be an insider.

On closer look, though, Liv’s embrace of Hata as an exemplary citizen of Bedley Run is only possible by her negation of any political mobilization for change on the part of the Asian immigrant. What makes Hata exemplary, in Liv’s effusive argument, is his willingness to surrender to the place: “You come to a place like this,” she cries, “you don’t make it yours with money or change it by the virtuous coffee color of your skin or do anything but welcomingly submit and you’re happy to do so” (136). Not only does she place Hata in opposition to conspicuous wealth but she also places him in opposition to Renny, or, more specifically, the potential political capital she sees in “the virtuous coffee color of [Renny’s] skin.” Liv’s skepticism toward Renny’s complaints simultaneously registers her recognition that the kind of racial awareness Renny expresses could lead to the political mobilization of people of color, which she does not want to imagine. With his unwillingness to acknowledge Renny’s complaints about the towners’ xenophobia and racism, Hata misses the opportunity to see another possibility of Asian racialization, the kind within which he and Renny can form a political alliance to stand together against racism. Instead Hata chooses to stay within the realm of the model minority, which dilutes the specificity of his Korean American identity and experiences into vague (and often erroneous) ideas of Asian cultural values.

Of course doing so allows Hata to enjoy what he calls “the discretionary pleasures of ownership” (137), although he suggests that this is due to his ability to navigate the social relations of the suburbs, governed by “an unwritten covenant of conduct” as opposed to his acceptance of the model-minority role (44). The term “covenant” in Hata’s usage refers to the codes of conduct in the suburbs—the “signet of cordiality and decorum” of suburbia (44)—but it also evokes covenants of



a different kind from earlier decades: restrictive covenants, which white property owners employed to exclude black Americans from their neighborhoods and from property ownership.<sup>59</sup> Whereas restrictive covenants of the earlier period limited association between peoples and controlled property ownership by law, the unwritten covenants Hata lives by are culturally inscribed. The cultural characteristic of these covenants allows Hata to dismiss the conditions of possibility for his economic mobility and, instead, attribute his material success to the work of providence: “It seems,” he says, “I have always been fortunate to be in a certain provident time and place, which must be my sole skill, and worth, and luck.”<sup>60</sup> Hata’s ignoring his own racialization as a model minority in the suburbs echoes his previous refusal to see his racialization as a Korean Japanese subject in the Japanese Imperial Army.

If Hata tries to avoid the racial signs of blackness and Koreanness that inhibit his identification with the propertied, white middle class, Sunny constantly brings these signs home, reminding him that his belief in his inclusion might be an illusion. Her refusal to subscribe to his notion of providence, which rewards him with material opportunities, perturbs him to no end: “at least,” he thinks, “she’d be somewhat appreciative of the providence of institutions that brought her from the squalor of the orphanage . . . to an orderly, welcoming suburban home in America, with a hopeful father of like-enough race and sufficient means” (73). Instead of showing gratitude and appreciation for the middle-class life that Hata offers her, Sunny associates with people who Hata and other respectable members of Bedley Run view as dangerous and sketchy. The delinquency that Hata and the morals of Bedley Run attribute to Sunny, however, points to her struggles to find her place in the American suburb without erasing the traces of US militarism in South Korea in her life. Her criticism of Hata’s inauthenticity—“You make a whole life out of gestures and politeness. You’re always having to be the ideal partner and colleague” (95)—sharply brings into focus the act of forgetting Hata engages in for a normative life in the suburbs.

While Hata’s gestures mask the racial politics of postwar suburban life, Sunny’s search for her place in the suburb starkly exposes such politics. A scene in the novel when Hata goes to a shady part of town in search of the teenage Sunny illustrates this well. Geographically removed from the area of Bedley Run where Hata lives, the location of the party already suggests a disruption of middle-class respectability. Once inside the house where the party is being held, Hata is surprised at the racial makeup: “What struck me immediately was that a number of the partygoers were black and Puerto Rican; colored people were a rare sight in Bedley Run, especially at social events, and never did one see such ‘mixed’ gatherings” (101). Hata finds himself lost at this party that is completely outside the social and cultural norms of the middle-class suburb.

The transgressive qualities of the party house, however, are not just limited to its being outside the normative spatial configuration of the American suburb. It

becomes a place where Hata needs to reckon with the violence of war, which first comes up through his memory of the Pacific War. Walking through the party house looking for Sunny, he suddenly remembers the Korean comfort woman he encountered in a brothel in Singapore before he was stationed in Burma. Fleeing from rape, a young Korean woman had begged him to let her escape. Imprinted in Hata's memory is the brief exchange between him and this woman in Korean, their mother tongue, which imbues that moment with an unbearable sense of guilt and impotence (111–12). This flash of memory connects the two disparate and removed spaces of the Singaporean brothel and the party house, alerting readers to the fact that Hata's experiences of the war shade his understanding of Korean women's sexuality. For Hata, Korean women's sexuality suggests both a vulnerability to racialized military aggression and a shame over such vulnerability.

Hata's unresolved relationship to his past resurfaces when he witnesses Sunny engaged in sexually suggestive acts with a young black man, Lincoln. Behind the apparent discomfort Hata expresses at this witnessing as a father, one can also sense Hata reliving his past feelings of racial shame. As he watches Sunny with Lincoln, he is forced to revisit his imagining of "a night's wanton encounter between a GI and a local bar girl" when he first met Sunny (204). At this point in the narrative, the reader can see that Hata's self-righteous moral indignation toward female sex workers in Korean camp towns may well reflect a patriarchal sense of injury to his own masculinity. Korean women's sexual availability to American GIs reminds him of the shame of a violated nation and his inability to do anything about it. Along with the Singaporean brothel, the neocolonial camp towns of South Korea are superimposed onto the nonwhite ghetto of Bedley Run. The party house not only transgresses the norms of white American suburbia but also goes beyond a nation-bounded conception of space to show that the condition of racialized oppression from which Hata ran also exists in his life in the American suburb. Despite the distance that geographically separates Hata's current location from his place of origin, the two are placed on a continuum of racialized development in the trans-Pacific. Hata's strong judgment of Sunny's voluntary downward mobility and his resentment toward her black partner, Lincoln, express his own insecurities about his place in his adopted country. Hata's disavowal of any affiliation with blackness is thoroughly imbued with a dread of the social bottom, of being the Korean woman, of being the victim of the racialization of the ideology of development.

In this article, I have tried to show that a Korean American subject is already constituted by signs of blackness since the emergence and circulation of a Korean American subject presupposes the crossing of Koreanness with both black and white America. Viewing the racial sign of blackness as a constitutive part of the Korean American subject helps us reexamine our assumptions of race when discussing the relationships between black and Korean Americans. Empiricist outlooks on this subject often assume that black and Korean are signs that are exterior to each other, perhaps because actual instances of social and political conflict involve racialized

bodies that are exterior to each other. The importance of the material body notwithstanding, I have taken an approach to examining Afro-Korean connections that emphasizes race as signs—signs that suggest prestige or stigma, alliance or rejection, trust or hatred—by turning to literature. At the very least, Kang’s, Fenkl’s, and Lee’s literary imaginings of Afro-Korean connections serve as a reminder that neither the model of racial competition nor that of racial solidarity fully explains the complex relations black and Korean Americans developed within the currents of transnational migration. But more than that, they enable us to appreciate the social and political constitution of subjectivity through racial signs and values, which circulate and change with the flows of labor, capital, and military incursions.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Colleen Lye, “The Afro-Asian Analogy,” *PMLA* 123, no. 5 (2008): 1732–36.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Kim’s comparative analysis of black and Asian American masculinities in cultural nationalist writings is an early example of this line of scholarship. Daniel Y. Kim, *Writing Manhood in Black and Yellow: Ralph Ellison, Frank Chin, and the Literary Politics of Identity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005). Julia Lee’s exploration of the “reciprocal representations” in writings by African and Asian Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century, for example, tries to complicate what she calls the “monolithic terms” of discussing Afro-Asian connections in contemporary discourse through recourse to historical and literary precedents. Julia H. Lee, *Interracial Encounters: Reciprocal Representations in African and Asian American Literatures, 1896-1937* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 3. Another example of a nuanced approach to Afro-Asian relations is Helen Jun’s examination of Orientalist imaginings of Asians and Asian Americans by black Americans. Helen Heran Jun, *Race for Citizenship: Black Orientalism and Asian Uplift from Pre-Emancipation to Neoliberal America* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>3</sup> Claire Jean Kim, *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> Nadia Y. Kim, *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Sök-kyöng Kang, “Days and Dreams,” in *Words of Farewell: Stories by Korean Women Writers*, trans. Bruce Fulton and Ju-Chan Fulton (Seattle: Seal Press, 1989), 1–27; Heinz Insu Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (1996; repr., New York: Plume, 1997); and Chang-rae Lee, *A Gesture Life* (New York: Riverhead, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Elaine H. Kim, “Korean American Literature,” in *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, ed. King-Kok Cheung (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 158.

<sup>7</sup> One may ask if the subject of Afro-Korean relations itself is not a post-1992 phenomenon. It is true that the events of 1992 in Los Angeles mark a watershed in Korean American formation, as studies such as Min Hyoung Song’s *Strange Future* show. However, instead of viewing 1992 as the starting point for Afro-Korean relations, I view the Los Angeles riots as a point of rupture in Korean American racial formation that brought into high relief the subterranean current of Afro-Korean relations. That is, it is not that Afro-Korean relations did not exist prior to 1992 but that the crisis in Los Angeles brought to the surface the structural conditions of Afro-Korean relations presaged in the racialization of development in the trans-Pacific. Min Hyoung Song, *Strange Future: Pessimism and the 1992 Los Angeles Riots* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> The ambivalent legacy of the Park Chung Hee regime (1961–1979) best describes the tumultuous character of nation-building in this period. Park brutally suppressed democracy movements and instituted economic development plans that industrialized South Korea. See Hyung-A Kim, *Korea’s Development under Park Chung Hee: Rapid Industrialization, 1961–79* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

<sup>9</sup> Jin-kyung Lee, *Service Economies: Militarism, Sex Work, and Migrant Labor in South Korea* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 91.

<sup>10</sup> Belinda Kong, “Beyond K’s Specter: Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*, Comfort Women Testimonies, and Asian American Transnational Aesthetics,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 3, no.1 (2011): 1, <http://escholarship.org/uc/item/op22m4tb>. The complexity of the politics of language in the comfort women debates is too big of a topic to be unpacked here, but a note on terminology may still be in need. As the editors of *JTAS* point out, English-language journalism has often employed the term “sex slaves” in referencing women deployed by the Japanese military to have sex with soldiers of the Japanese Imperial Army, a journalistic decision that no doubt reflects the international conversations on the subject in the context of an increasing recognition of women’s rights as human rights in the 1990s. According to C. Sarah Soh, compared to the term “comfort women,” which is a “statist euphemism” and reflects the ideology of “fascistic paternalism,” the term “sex slaves” reflects “feminist humanitarianism,” which “conceives of the comfort system as military sexual slavery enforced by state power, resulting in gross violations of women’s human rights and requiring state compensation to the survivors.” C. Sarah Soh, *The Comfort Women: Sexual Violence and Postcolonial Memory in Korea and Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 31–32. Despite

my disagreement with the ideology that underwrites the term comfort women, I use the term over sex slaves here in accordance with its usage in scholarship on the subject by scholars such as Soh cited above and You-me Park. See Soh, *Comfort Women*, especially 29–77; and You-me Park, “Comforting the Nation: ‘Comfort Women,’ the Politics of Apology and the Workings of Gender,” *Interventions* 2, no. 2 (2000): 199–211.

<sup>11</sup> For discussions of the novel’s transnationalism through its engagement of the comfort woman question, see Kong, “Beyond K’s Specter”; Laura Hyun Yi Kang, “Conjuring ‘Comfort Women’: Mediated Affiliations and Disciplined Subjects in Korean/American Transnationality,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 25–55; and Kandice Chuh, “Discomforting Knowledge, or, Korean ‘Comfort Women’ and Asian Americanist Critical Practice,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 6, no. 1 (2003): 5–23.

<sup>12</sup> While the book is billed as autobiographical fiction, Fenkl states that he sees the manuscript as flexible enough “to be categorized as autobiography, memoir, or fiction” in “Images from a Stolen Camera.” Heinz Insu Fenkl, “Images from a Stolen Camera: An Autoethnographic Recursion,” 1996, accessed January 3, 2012, n1, <http://heinzinsufenkl.net/autoeth.html>. Pupyong, sometimes romanized as Bupyong, is one of the first camp towns in South Korea. See Ji-Yeon Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown: Korean Military Brides in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2004), 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> Kang is said to have lived in a camp town before writing “Days and Dreams” and “Night and Cradle,” another short story set in a camp town and narrated from the point of view of a female sex worker. Bruce Fulton and Ju-Chan Fulton, introduction to Fulton and Fulton, *Words of Farewell*, ix. The English translation of “Days and Dreams” omits the narrator’s name and makes her unnamed, but she is identified as “Baek” in the Korean original. I use the Korean version when necessary. Sök-kyöng Kang, “Nat gwa ggum,” *Bam gwa yoram* (Seoul: Minumsa, 1983).

<sup>14</sup> Kang, “Days and Dreams,” 22.

<sup>15</sup> Fenkl, “Images from a Stolen Camera.”

<sup>16</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Na Young Lee, “The Construction of Military Prostitution in South Korea during the U.S. Military Rule, 1945–1948,” *Feminist Studies* 33, no. 3 (2007): 454.

<sup>18</sup> Sallie Yea, “Marginality, Transgression, and Transnational Identity Negotiations in Korea’s *Kijich’on*,” in *Sitings: Critical Approaches to Korean Geography*, ed. Timothy R. Tangherlini and Sallie Yea (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2008), 186.

<sup>19</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 24. Na Young Lee offers an astute analysis of the politics of regulating sex work in camp towns. While the US military’s official view on prostitution is that it is illegal, unofficially it condones camp town prostitution by delegating the regulation of sex workers to local Korean authorities. According to Lee,

the US military's policies on prostitution are continuous with the former Japanese military's policies in Korea. Lee, "Construction of Military Prostitution," 456. Territorially, camp towns are under the jurisdiction of the Korean state. Yet in many cases, the sovereignty of the Korean state is only nominal in the goings-on of camp towns. Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon say that Status of Forces Agreements (or SOFAs) between the US and South Korea "have undermined [South Korean] national sovereignty in many ways and contain the contradiction of America's liberal imperialism." Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon, "Introduction: The Politics of Gender, Sexuality, Race, and Class in the U.S. Military Empire," in *Over There: Living with the U.S. Military Empire from World War Two to the Present*, ed. Maria Höhn and Seungsook Moon (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 15.

<sup>20</sup> Sturdevant and Stoltzfus say that bars and clubs for black GIs are often smaller and less well maintained than those for white GIs, a spatial distinction that shows the hierarchy of white over black. See Sandra Pollock Sturdevant and Brenda Stoltzfus, *Let the Good Times Roll: Prostitution and the U.S. Military in Asia* (New York: New Press, 1993), 47, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 93. KATUSAs, or the Korean Augmentation Troops to the US Army, are "young South Korean conscripts that have been attached to the U.S. Army." Höhn and Moon, "Introduction," 17.

<sup>22</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S. 537 (1896). Harlan's statement contains many loaded aspects of race relations in the US, including the honorary white status that is conferred on select Asian Americans for select purposes and the argument for black American equality being made at the expense of Asian American civic inclusion.

<sup>24</sup> Lee, *Service Economies*, 161. Lee also attends to a sense of solidarity between Korean sex workers and black GIs when she says that, "for those women who live with or marry African American men, the fact of their men's racialization becomes a basis of kinship, as the women themselves experience their own racialization imposed on them by Koreans and white Americans in camp towns" (162).

<sup>25</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 253–54. Fenkl says that Koreans called white soldiers "yellow-haired soldiers." Fenkl, "Images from a Stolen Camera."

<sup>26</sup> Historian Charles Armstrong points out that "between 1965 and 1973 the Republic of Korea contributed a cumulative total of more than 300,000 combat troops to the American war effort, second only to the United States itself and far exceeding all other Allied contributions combined." Charles K. Armstrong, "America's Korea, Korea's Vietnam," *Critical Asian Studies* 33, no. 4 (2001): 531.

<sup>27</sup> Armstrong astutely attends to the psychological burden Korean soldiers might have borne in distinguishing themselves from the Vietnamese enemy who looked like them and aligning themselves with the US allies. *Ibid.*, 535–36.

<sup>28</sup> Jin-Kyung Lee also notes that Korean female sex workers are “racialized as white or black” “depend[ing] on with whom they mainly associate themselves.” Lee, *Service Economies*, 161.

<sup>29</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 210.

<sup>30</sup> Kang, “Nat gwa ggum,” 255. The phrase “black prostitute,” which occurs in Korean as “heuk-in saek-shi,” is a translation of mine. The Fultons translate the Korean expression indirectly as “when I was going out with Blacks.” Kang, “Days and Dreams,” 10.

<sup>31</sup> In *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, Yuh provides a taxonomy of the stigma attached to the camp town sex workers. They were called variously “yang galbo (Western whore),” “yang gongju (Western princess),” and “yang saeksi (Western bride).” Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 20. She says that “the use of ‘princess’ and ‘bride’ to describe these women can be seen as a rhetorical gesture that acknowledges the material comfort and glamour symbolized by the United States while ridiculing the women’s efforts to achieve it by selling their bodies to American soldiers” (20). Grace Cho describes the same paradox of the camp town sex worker’s subject position: “She is the woman who simultaneously provokes her compatriots’ hatred because of her complicity with Korea’s subordination and inspires their envy because she is within arm’s reach of the American dream.” Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>32</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Kang, “Days and Dreams,” 12. Critics have voiced their discomfort of how the female sex workers in Kang’s short story “long to fill traditional feminine roles and identities” “instead of rejecting marriage and patriarchal family ideals.” Hyun Sook Kim, “Yanggongju as an Allegory of the Nation: The Representation of Working-Class Women in Popular and Radical Texts,” in *Dangerous Women: Gender and Korean Nationalism*, ed. Elaine H. Kim and Chungmoo Choi (New York: Routledge, 1998), 187. While I agree with the critical assessment of the camp town’s sexual culture as heteronormative, I do not view such representation as necessarily a sign that Kang espouses heteronormativism.

<sup>34</sup> Kang, “Days and Dreams,” 23.

<sup>35</sup> Lee, *Service Economies*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> Kang, “Days and Dreams,” 24.

<sup>37</sup> Fenkl, *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, 229.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 221. *Kkomdunggi* is a derogatory Korean word for a black person.

<sup>39</sup> In an interview with Dwight Garner, Chang-rae Lee says that he initially planned to write the novel from the perspective of a comfort woman but subsequently changed his mind after his experience of hearing the testimonies of former comfort women in South

Korea. Dwight Garner, "An Interview: Adopted Voice," *New York Times Book Review*, September 5, 1999, 6.

<sup>40</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 251. Soh discusses the same term as "Japanese soldiers' sexualizing and objectifying slang for Korean comfort women." Soh, *Comfort Women*, 163.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 235, 244.

<sup>42</sup> See Anne Anlin Cheng, "Passing, Natural Selection, and Love's Failure: Ethics of Survival from Chang-rae Lee to Jacques Lacan," *American Literary History* 17, no. 3 (2005): 553-74.

<sup>43</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 249.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton Carroll and Mark Jerng have attended to the trope of mixed race in Lee's representation of Sunny. Focusing on the impossibility of a single origin story for the adoptee, Jerng shows how multiple histories of colonization, both internal to the US and global, undergird Hata's disturbing response to Sunny. Mark C. Jerng, "Recognizing the Transracial Adoptee: Adoption Life Stories and Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *MELUS* 31, no. 2 (2006): 41-67. Carroll's reading of Sunny is more directly relevant to the question I ask in this article. While Carroll views Hata's response to Sunny as reflective of how "race-based national logics" exclude mixed-race subjects, the nation he has in mind is the US. Hata's response, according to Carroll, is the result of an immigrant's internalization of U.S. racial biases. Hamilton Carroll, "Traumatic Patriarchy: Reading Gendered Nationalisms in Chang-rae Lee's *A Gesture Life*," *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 51, no. 3 (2005): 612.

<sup>45</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 204.

<sup>46</sup> Yuh, *Beyond the Shadow of Camptown*, 21.

<sup>47</sup> In a recent study on the problem of mixed-race people between the 1950s and the 1960s, A-ram Kim places the issue of overseas adoption for mixed-race children in the context of the nationalist ideology employed by the South Korean government. According to her, mixed-race people did not have any place in the model of citizenry the Korean government of the 1950s had in mind. Defined through bloodline, Koreanness did not leave any room for foreign blood—black or white—and the government tried to isolate mixed-race people, both ideologically and physically, despite the many problems it encountered in doing so. A-ram Kim, "The Subject of Mixed-Blood People in South Korea from the 1950s to Early 1960s: Focused on Adoption and Education" [in Korean] (master's thesis, Ewha Woman's University, 2009). Another 1969 study on children in the welfare system conducted in Korea states that "it is seldom the case that [Korean] orphans and mixed-race children are placed in the same institution." Jung-hae Kim, "The Social Adjustment of Korean and Mixed-race Children under Institutional Care" [in Korean], *Social Welfare Review* 3 (1969): 74. The translation is mine. The conflation of



race and blood in Korea can be seen distinctly in the Korean term for mixed race, “hon-hyul,” which literally means “mixed blood.”

<sup>48</sup> Kim, “Subject of Mixed-Blood People,” 24.

<sup>49</sup> See Holt Children’s Services, Inc., *Holt Children’s Services, Inc., 50 Years: 1955–2005* [in Korean] (Seoul: Holt Children’s Services, 2005), 24.

<sup>50</sup> In a newspaper article published in 1962, then sixteen-year-old Jin-goon Kang, who calls himself probably the oldest age group of mixed-race children in South Korea, inserts a brief statement on half-black Koreans in his appeal to the editor to find his American father for him: “Although we are all mixed-race, I am slightly better off for being white (heen-doong-i). Black (kkam-doong-i) mixed-race kids are much worse off. People stare at the black kids with the expression that they see something repulsive.” Jin-goon Kang, “The Legacy of 8.15,” *Gook-min-bo (People’s Daily)*, no. 3619, September 26, 1962, my translation. The first newsletter of the Holt Adoption Program, published in 1959, included “find[ing] homes for African-Asian children” in their list of prayers, which indicates that the agency had more difficulty placing mixed-race black children than mixed-race white children. *Holt Children’s Services*, 170.

<sup>51</sup> A 1969 article published in a South Korean social work journal on the status of mixed-race children in government facilities presents three reasons behind the low rate of adoption for half-black Korean children: (1) the unwillingness on the part of black Americans to see foreign blacks enter the US, (2) the fertility among black Americans, and (3) black Americans’ low economic status. Young-in Kim, “A Study on the State of Mixed-race Children in Government Facilities” [in Korean], *Social Work* (1969): 5–24.

<sup>52</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 335.

<sup>53</sup> Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton state that the suburbanization took place most extensively between 1945 and 1970. Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid: Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 61. A couple of critics, such as Seongho Yoon and June Dwyer, have attended to the suburb in *A Gesture Life* as a racially charged space by reading Hata’s assimilation as ultimately a failure. Seongho Yoon, ““Being in a Place and Not Being There’: Asian American Space, the American Suburb, and Transnational Imageries in Chang-rae Lee’s *A Gesture Life*,” in *The American Village in a Global Setting: Selected Papers from an Interdisciplinary Conference in Honor of Sinclair Lewis and Ida K. Compton*, ed. Michael E. Connaughton and Suellen Rundquist (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 272–85; and June Dwyer, “Ethnic Home Improvement: Gentrifying the Ghetto, Spicing Up the Suburbs,” *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 14, no. 2 (2007): 165–82. Yoon, in particular, makes the argument that “the reconstruction of American suburbs [can] be read within the logic of transnationalism.” Yoon, ““Being in a Place,”” 274. This “logic of transnationalism,” however, seems

synonymous to the logic of Asian immigrant assimilation (or its impossibility) in Yoon's article.

<sup>54</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 3.

<sup>55</sup> Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 61.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 3.

<sup>57</sup> See Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," in *A Companion to Asian American Studies*, ed. Kent A. Ono (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 215–25.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 16.

<sup>59</sup> Massey and Denton define restrictive covenants as "contractual agreements among property owners stating that they would not permit a black to own, occupy, or lease their property." Massey and Denton, *American Apartheid*, 36.

<sup>60</sup> Lee, *Gesture Life*, 138.

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