second section
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SPECIAL SECTION: KOREAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

The future of Korean American literature

New authors stretch "ethnic" genre in telling the stories of Korean Americans *By Heinz Insu Fenkl*

In the past year or so there have been numerous high-profile Korean American works celebrated in commercial periodicals and newspapers. In 2004, Chang-rae Lee published ***Aloft***, to great acclaim and coverage in many mainstream media including ***Time*** magazine. Don Lee came out with his novel of intrigue ***Country of Origin***, and Edward Jae Suk Lee introduced ***The Good Man***, a tale of a tortured Korean War veteran. Women Korean American authors are also represented, with Mia Yun publishing her second novel ***Translations of Beauty***, Newbery Award-winning author Linda Sue Park coming out with a young adult offering ***The Mulberry Project***, and Marie Lee premiering her first novel for adult readers, ***Somebody's Daughter***, due out in April.


Heinz Insu Fenkl

In 2003, ***The New York Times Book Review*** covered Susan Choi's second novel, ***American Woman***; this week, Suki Kim's first novel, ***The Interpreter*** was also covered in ***The New York Times Book Review***.

Linda Sue Park's young adult novel, ***A Single Shard***, won the prestigious Newbery Award in 2002, and her books are so successful that they are now practically ubiquitous in the children's section of Barnes and Noble. Nora Okja Keller's second novel, ***Fox Girl***, and Don Lee's short story collection, ***Yellow***, were also recent prominent works coming from the mainstream presses.

The past couple of years have also seen the publication of anthologies such as ***Kori: The Beacon Anthology of Korean American Fiction*** (2001), edited by Walter K. Lew and me; ***Century of the Tiger: One Hundred Years of Korean Culture in America 1903-2003***, special issue of the journal ***Manoa*** coedited by Jenny Ryun Foster, Frank Stewart and myself; ***Echoes Upon Echoes: New Korean American Writings*** (2003), from the Asian American Writers Workshop, edited by Elaine Kim and Laura Kang; ***Yobo: Korean American Writing in Hawaii***, an anthology from Bamboo Ridge, for which Nora Okja Keller was one of the co-editors (along with Brenda Kwon, Sun Namkung, Gary Pak, and Cathy Song); and finally, ***Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean-American Literature 1903-2003***, edited by Yearn Hong Choi and Haeng Ja Kim. Most of these collections were timed to correspond with last year's centennial of Korean immigration to the United States.

Also, released by small presses, are three works that represent other new directions and trends. Jane Jeong Trenka's memoir, ***The Language of Blood*** (2003), was published by Borealis, which is an imprint of the Minnesota Historical Society Press; Gary Pak's next novel, ***Children of a Fireland***, will be released by University of Hawaii Press; and also a strange collection of stories and essays by Minsoo Kang, a graduate student in history at UCLA, called ***Of Tales and Enigmas***, was published by Prime Books, a small fringe press that specializes in edgy and innovative science fiction and fantasy. This book is especially interesting because it doesn't even fit the niche in which it is being published.

SELF-REFERENCE AND GENREFICATION

When an initially marginal literature finally establishes itself as prominent with awards and commercial success (Korean American writers are a veritable Who's Who of award winners), future works in that category tend to demonstrate a heightened self-consciousness. The works tend to become intertextual performances, and begins to cross the boundaries of genre and form. This is especially true these days, with the increasing prevalence of mixed-media and web-based works (which are typically a mixture of still and moving visual images, sound, and text).

In the early days of Korean American literature (in the 1920s through the '50s) when Younghill Kang was the only significant voice, there was no model, no set of pre-existing Korean American subtexts to which new Korean American writers could make explicit or implicit allusion. Kang's own subtexts were a complex combination of classical and canonical Asian and European works, and his mode of allusion was not adequately understood by his audience at the time. ***continued on page 74***

Finding a new voice

Author Marie Myung-Ok Lee demonstrates empathy for birthmothers and adoptees

By Martha Vickery


Marie Myung-Ok Lee

The painful building of identity in a new place — the casting off of old qualities and experimentation with new ones — is a theme that Marie Myong-Ok Lee has lived and related expertly to her readers in her past works of so-called young adult fiction.

Lee, brought up in Hibbing, Minnesota, now lives in Providence, Rhode Island with her husband and son. Her previous works for teens include the autobiographical ***Finding My Voice***, and its sequel, ***Saying Goodbye***, as well as four other novels with Korean American characters, including ***If It Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun***, ***Necessary Roughness***, ***F is for Fabuloso***, and ***Night of the Chupacabras***.

Her new book, ***Somebody's Daughter***, due out in April, is about a young adult rather than a teen, and it is her first foray into writing a novel for adult readers. It is, however, her second account of the life of an adopted Korean.

The first was the protagonist in ***If It Hadn't Been for Yoon Jun***, which involves an adopted Korean girl in a small-town high school, who is in complete denial over her Korean heritage until she gets it rubbed in her face by the arrival of the undeniably foreign Korean immigrant student Yoon Jun. They are forced into working on a school project together (about Korea, of course), and Yun Joon's quiet pride and gentle spirit teaches her it might be pretty cool to be Korean after all.

Somebody's Daughter is a different tack on this theme. The protagonist Sarah Thorson is not in denial about being Korean — she simply does not know anything about it. A drifting college drop-out, Sarah's suburban Minnesotan family seems to participate together in an elaborate denial game about their daughter's Korean heritage. Pushed by her emotional need, Sarah decides on her own, with no encouragement from her family, that she will enroll in a year-long college program for English speakers in Seoul, in order to participate in and learn about Korean culture. Once there, she decides she will search for her birth parents on her own.

What unfolds in the rest of the novel are two stories parallel to one another — the Sarah stories about one young woman's painful acclimation to Korea and search for her birth mother, and the stories of Kyung Sook, the birth mother she has never met, whose story is told in many flashbacks which build, for the reader, the circumstances that led to Sarah's adoption. ***continued on page 72***

Finding a new voice

(Continued from cover of Second Section, page 53)

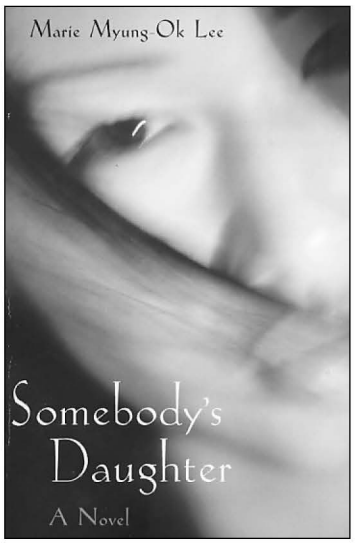
Lee said she started writing her Sarah stories in 1992, and hit a wall with them at some point in the mid-'90s. She couldn't go any further without knowing the story of the birth mother as well. She applied for a Fulbright Fellowship and, to her surprise, received it. The Fulbright program provides money for expenses and other support to allow researchers to work on their projects for a year.

Arriving in Korea with little more than a suitcase, an idea, and some funding, Lee inquired at a Korean maternity home, where women come to give birth and then, most of the time, make domestic or international adoption arrangements for their child. She had been introduced, through U.S. connections, to the director, from whom she encountered resistance to the idea of her interviewing any of the birth mothers, since most are single women, and vulnerable to rejection from their families if it discovered they were (or had been) pregnant.

At loose ends, Lee decided just to come and help out at the maternity home, and make herself useful however she could. "I participated in *kim jang* (the fall kimchi-making season), and soon found out that many of the women wanted to learn English," she said. Lee offered to teach English, and was accepted by the residents.

"A lot of people wanted to learn how to talk on the phone," she said. "Really basic things." At first, she had a teacher-student relationship with the women, she said, "but I ended up getting really close to a lot of them."

She understood more acutely, as time wore on, the director's reluctance to have anyone collect documentary information about these women at such a vulnerable time. "I didn't feel that it would be appropriate for me (to interview them), because I thought, well, I'm not a social worker, and a lot of them were really, really young," she recalled. "So, I got really depressed about it. I just thought, well, I'm here but I'm not doing anything. But, I was taking Korean classes and my



Korean was getting better."

It was the director herself who finally suggested a strategy that would work. "She said she would try to get together some people who had had babies a long time ago, who were kind of alumni of the program."

When I showed up with my translator, she said, 'no, you can't bring a translator,' and then I was really wondering how it would go. My Korean is really not very serviceable but for some reason at that time, my Korean was really 'on.' Just for that time, I felt I understood well and I spoke well.

"They were all so willing, and said 'you can ask me anything,' and I did. Really stupid and really embarrassing questions. They were just really willing to tell me everything, and I don't think it was because it was personal or they were doing me a favor, but it was really because they wanted to give me the fullest, most honest picture possible."

The birth mothers also had their own agenda — the opportunity to get a collective message across to adoptees through Lee's writing. "They thought that if their kids might see it, that they would know that they were human and that this just happened."

The birthmothers she worked with felt like a very victimized group, Lee said. "All felt that Korean society made them into criminals. They used the word 'jain' which means criminal. That was their biggest thing. That they would never be able to talk about how they did this



Marie Myung Ok Lee

tremendous thing, out of love, and they were forced to be silent about it." There were all kinds of personal situations represented among the women she interviewed, Lee said. Some were single. Others were married and had families, and were having a child out of wedlock. Although there is no one woman whose situation is the same as the character Kyung Sook's, many of the women found themselves there because of very unfortunate twists of fate. "It all got really complicated," Lee said. "But the overwhelming thing was that they wanted their children to know that they were loved. And that this was done out of love."

After getting a sense of the birth mother's stories, Lee said, she then had to put it in a setting of 20 years ago. Kyung Sook and other characters who interacted in her story were dealing with a life that was characterized by a harsh military dictatorship and a much lower standard of living than what is enjoyed by South Koreans today. "Some of it was just about trusting your imagination …at the same time I felt that if anyone who knew anything about Korea saw this, I wanted it to be accurate, so I felt that kind of pressure too."

The two narratives, written during distinctly different time periods in her own life, had to also fit together. The Sarah stories got written in 1993 or 1994, right after ***Finding My Voice*** came out. And the Kyung Sook stories were written in 1997 through 2000. The Sarah stories were very close to her heart. "I have written about adoptees and I've known enough adoptees that that issue was right in front of my face," she said. "There was also a sense of cultural dislocation that I could really identify with. When you grow up in the only Asian family in Hibbing, (you are) isolated from your culture, thinking that Asian culture was really second rate. That was something I'm sure I internalized."

Marie Lee wrote an essay for the multicultural literature periodical ***English Journal*** (Autobiography *Straight Up and With a Twist*, January 2005) about how pieces of her own autobiography find their way into her fictional pieces, but none to the extent that they could be called an autobiography. And, since her life growing up in Hibbing, Minnesota was so fraught with feelings of alienation, and longings to just be "normal" like the white people she saw all around her, that searching mentality coalesces and takes on a life of its own in her characters' searches for their own identities.

Lee writes in ***Somebody's Daughter*** how the word "Korea" was an "oddly charged" word in the household of her character, Sarah Thorson. "But similarly, in our house, Korea was simply not discussed," Lee wrote in her article. "The few occasions when I asked my parents about their past, about the war, or asked them to teach me some Korean words, I was (if gently) rebuffed. My parents wanted to fit in too, and perhaps they felt that by showing how willing they were to throw their lot purely with America, they would then seem more American to everyone else as well."

What Lee writes about her character Sarah's initiation into Korean society is painful. Arriving at the campus before the other students, Sarah starves for days because she cannot order anything to eat, and cannot figure out the money. She has an intimidating misadventure with an angry food cart vendor. "Korean culture is just so different," Lee said, "Like when I watched AFKN (the TV channel for the armed forces in Korea), there was a guy on a public service announcement saying 'Stupid chopsticks, I can't eat with these!' and throwing them, and the voiceover said 'you are in a foreign country and you should be more sensitive to the customs of this country!' and stuff like that. I was, like, 'Oh, come on!' …but it gives you a better idea of what kind of divide you are looking at with the two cultures."

Lee imagines that the character of Sarah "might not even know how to eat with chopsticks, or anything. What's funny is that a lot of people I've interviewed are a very self-selecting group," she said, explaining that the adoptees she knows are interested in Korea, and in an author doing research on adoptees in Korea. She does not tend to meet the adoptees who have been discouraged from searching or who are not interested in it. So she still has not met an adoptee who is dealing with the extremes of cultural isolation experienced by Sarah.

Lee describes Sarah as "a very unreliable narrator" in her relating of everything from her disgust with Korean hygiene to her adoptive mother's attitude of uptight denial about Sarah's cultural background. Sarah also sneaks in some memories of her parents being extra kind to her, and things she missed about them, toward the end. "In my mind, I don't see the mother as so monstrous as she is to Sarah's perspective. For Sarah, being 19, she's having all these problems. School doesn't work out.

She hates her parents. Her perceptions may be very skewed." The book teeters back and forth on the tension that the birth daughter Sarah, and her birth mother Kyung Sook, might meet. Lee said she went back and forth on those two options as well. She didn't know what was going to happen until the end. "Ian Forester wrote that when you write a book, it's like being on the highway at night, where you can only see what's ahead of you in the headlights. I kind of feel like that's how I work."

Some people have been calling her, Lee said, and asking, before the book is put up on individual websites, whether the book is "for or against adoption." Lee said she has no answer to this question. "My reply is, 'well, it's a novel. It's just about life. I can't say it's for or against adoption... What's wonderful about a novel is the fact that it's about life, in all its messiness. Sarah is far from perfect, and her mother, well, she's kind of a piece of work. And that's life. I just want to leave it open to the possibility of redemption at the end."

An adoptee friend was in the middle of reuniting and getting to know her birth mother while Lee was in Korea that winter, she said. "And I felt like I had all this material to use if Sarah should meet her birth mother in the end." She struggled, she said, with what would be the most typical… "reunions aren't happy stories either. …A reunion seems to be equally complicating. But not having it, I think you would wish for that physical, tangible thing. The genetic clay you came from."

Lee said she would "love if there would be a mainstream character who was a Korean adoptee. Like, Holden Caulfield (***Catcher in the Rye*** main character) was a white kid in a prep school. Just that anyone might want to read about her. And not think 'this exotic thing.'

"I think I get a lot more mail about ***Necessary Roughness***. People just say 'I loved the book,' that it was a great story. It makes me happy." ●

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The future of Korean American literature

Continued from cover of Second Section, page 49

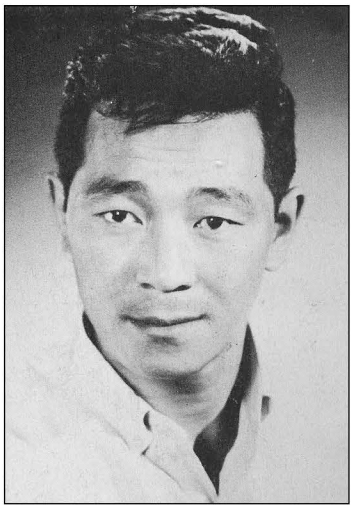
Today, Kang's ***The Grass Roof*** (1931) and ***East Goes West*** (1937) seem more innovative because, due to the trends in transcultural and comparative literary studies, we can more readily see what Kang was doing. But at the same time Kang's tropes, now that they are more visible, have also lost some of their original subtlety.

When Richard Kim wrote 30 years later, he was seen as alluding to European Existentialism. He was often compared to the French existentialist novelist Albert Camus, for example, especially for ***The Martyred*** (1964) because his American readers were, by and large, unaware of how the literary and philosophical traditions of Europe had spread to Korea, particularly through the spread of Christianity. This mixing of east and west meant that a writer could resonate with European philosophy while alluding to Korean subtexts.

There is a large lacuna between Richard Kim and the next prominent Korean American writer, Ronyoung Kim. Her novel, ***Clay Walls*** (1986) is in many ways a very Korean work. It merges autobiography and fiction, and was one of the only Korean American texts used in college courses for many years after the Asian American explosion of the late '70s. This was after Maxine Hong Kingston's ***The Woman Warrior*** (1976) opened up a new category of writing now known as Asian American literature. These days, for Korean literary scholars, ***Clay Walls*** fits nicely into the history of Korean literature as an example of *kyopo munhak* (Korean American cultural studies).

Between the early prominent Korean American male authors like Younghill Kang and Richard Kim and the new generation of both men's and women's voices that emerged in the mid '90s, there was an important — and for a time relatively unknown — transitional figure. This is the artist Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, whose book ***DICTEE*** was published in 1982. ***DICTEE*** defied classification from the first, and continues to be a deeply resonant and iconic touchstone in Korean American letters today, more than two decades later.

Cha's work was influenced by French Feminism, particularly by the



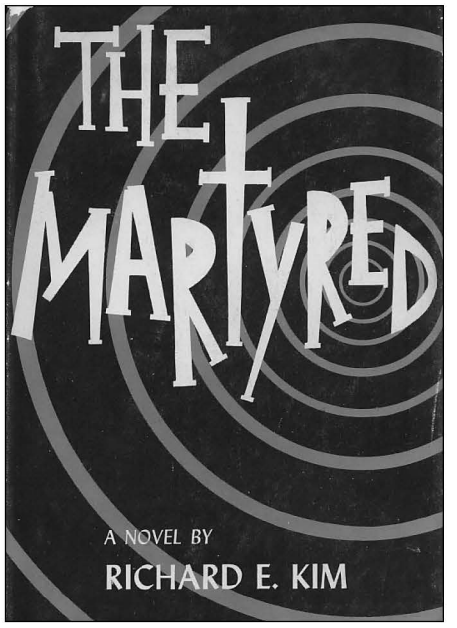
Richard E. Kim

work of writers like Monique Wittig and by Avant Garde film. ***DICTEE*** included historical Korean photos, an acupuncture diagram paralleled with constellations, and calligraphy; these components were arranged into a sort of postmodern collage that defied classification. Readers could not explain why it was so captivating. Some became almost obsessed with ***DICTEE***, which was taught in a surprising range of courses including Feminist Theory, Asian American literature, Lesbian Literature, and Postmodern Theory.

In sharp contrast to Cha, whose work, despite its high status, still resides in the periphery, is Chang-rae Lee, the most prominent Korean American writer currently in the literary mainstream. His first novel, ***Native Speaker*** (1995), was deceptively marketed as the first Korean American novel (despite the fact that Younghill Kang's works were bestsellers published by Scribners and edited by Maxwell Perkins, the editor of Ernest Hemingway).

Native Speaker was, in fact, a novelty in ethnic literature. It was an odd hybrid, combining the personal storytelling of what was by then a fairly typical Asian American memoir/novel, with the intrigue of a political espionage thriller. This combination proved to be marketable and accessible to a mainstream audience which was not necessarily interested in ethnic literature.

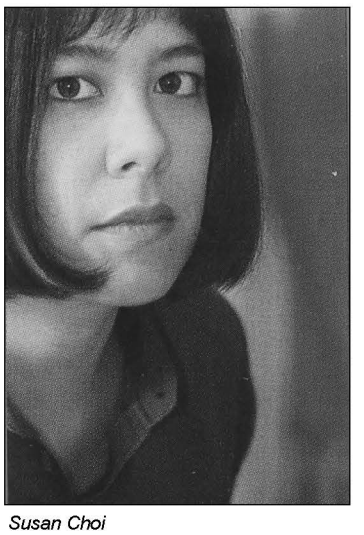
Leonard Chang takes this marketable hybridity to the next level of popular accessibility with his detective novels, ***Over the Shoulder*** (2001), ***Underkill*** (2003) and ***Fade to Clear*** (2004). These stories about his





STEPHEN WUNROW

Chang-rae Lee



Susan Choi

fictional private detective character Allen Choice, are a sort of consciously Hollywoodized amplification of the tropes in ***Native Speaker***, more story-centered and less self-reflective, yet with a lightly veiled ironic or sarcastic symbolism. His publisher marketed it as a mystery novel, and Chang has embraced his new identity as a genre writer.

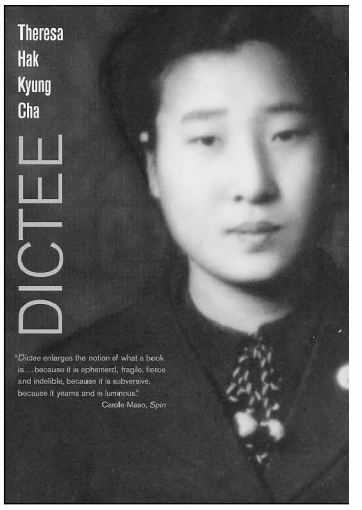
Suki Kim's ***The Interpreter*** (2003) is another interesting sort of hybrid work, borrowing its central premise from *The Court Reporter*, a short story by Ty Pak, which appeared in his collection ***Moonbay*** (1999). To the story of a young Korean American interpreter who finds herself in an unexpected position of power and moral conflict, Kim applies a more conventional story of a misguided and disaffected woman searching for love and identity.

Nora Okja Keller's ***Fox Girl*** (2002), which is a kind of historical extension of the elegant ***Comfort Woman*** (1997), draws on both Asian American subtexts and Korean subtexts, those available in English translations. Some of the details and background of ***Fox Girl*** come from Korean short stories: Chong-hui O's *Chinatown* and Chi-won Kim's *Days and Dreams*, both translated by Bruce and Ju Chan Fulton in their collection ***Words of Farewell*** (1989).

The conscious use of modern Korean literary subtexts is something relatively new — and an evolution, I think, from the typical use of historical and ethnographic research. Many of the literary allusions are, of course, invisible to the mainstream American reader, but for Korean scholars, they are far more resonant than for the western scholar.

In the world of mainstream publishing there is a tacit demand for easy accessibility that causes editors to encourage (or enforce) the kind of writing that many Korean American writers would like to view as a thing of the past. For example, Marie Lee's early works (like ***Finding My Voice***, [1994]) have set up expectations for a particular kind of Korean American ethnic identity novel.

So successfully has this expectation been enforced, in fact, that despite many attempts to write more literary "adult" fiction, Lee found herself trapped for more than a decade in the so-called "young adult" category of fiction that she had helped create. Lee recently succeeded in publishing



her first adult book, ***Somebody's Daughter*** *(reviewed this issue on page 57)* — a complex work that examines both the mother's and daughter's side of a Korean adoptee narrative, through Beacon Press, a small press with an imprint for literary works by women of color.

Although relatively complex works like An Na's ***A Step from Heaven*** (2002) are beginning finally to emerge in the young adult category, they are still overshadowed by works typified by those of Linda Sue Park, which are sincere, but which buy into the demands of mainstream publishing.

For example, Park's Newbery Award-winning book, ***A Single Shard*** (2001) is a story built around the history of celadon-making. Park does not read Korean and does not know much about Korean history or literature. Her research for the history of Korean celadon is limited to common sources available in a good pubic library — adequate for a children's book, but superficial by academic standards. But the story and the rendition of Korean culture and language — all accessible to a young reader — exemplify the kind of exotification and Orientalism that makes literary scholars wince.

Asian American literature has become, de facto, a genre as far as the publishing business is concerned, with some unintended consequences. To give a particularly ludicrous example, I located two Asian American literature courses in which David Guterson's ***Snow Falling on Cedars*** (1994) was taught as an Asian American novel because the professors had simply assumed, from the way the book had been marketed, that the author was Asian American. (Guterson is not an Asian American).

One of the professors rationalized the error by saying that Guterson's book was an Asian American novel, but that we needed to define Asian American differently. By these terms, if "Asian American" is a genre label, then other white writers like Danielle Steele — who also has a novel dealing with the Japanese American internment experience — can write it as well, in the same way that writers of any race may write a mystery or science fiction novel. Such rationalization presents a troubling, somewhat "in your face" redefinition of our inquiry.

But ironically, the strange logic of mainstream publishing has also helped give rise to a large and diverse range of expression in the category of Asian American, among which Korean Americans have tended to be especially innovative.

SELF-REDEFINITION

Recent Korean American works have been quite diverse in a way that resists the kind of essentialist typecasting of writers (and their subject matter) characteristic of the publishing business.

Don Lee's short story collection, ***Yellow*** (2003), represents this trend very well. Lee writes with a clear awareness not only of what is going on in Asian American literary expression in general, but also of what is happening in the literary mainstream. Some of his stories have a deceptively slick, entertaining, and accessible surface; and while they are self-reflective in the way of earlier memoirs and memoir-like novels, under the surface, one often detects a sly subversion of readers' expectations.

Lee's recent offering, ***Country of Origin***, manages the same kind of interesting combination of literary style, self-reflection, and mystery. Other Korean American writers have tried to move away from ethnic typecasting in more overt ways. Both Chang-rae Lee and Susan Choi have Japanese Americans as central characters in their most recent novels. The main character of Jerry Battle in ***Aloft*** (2004) is a white guy from the suburbs, albeit a widower of a Korean woman; and Franklin Hata, the main character in ***A Gesture Life*** (1999), is a Japanese of Korean ancestry.

The central character in ***American Woman*** (2003) is Jenny Shimada, a Japanese American based on Wendy Yoshimura, the SLA member assigned to watch Patty Hearst while



Nora Okja Keller



Mia Yun

she was held captive in the mid-'70s. ***American Woman*** is almost a public expression of the Choi's redefinition of her own identity as a writer.

With her first novel, ***The Foreign Student*** (1998), Choi had been classified, much against her will, as an Asian American writer. The content of ***The Foreign Student***, whose main character is a Korean man, made that classification inescapable. When she spoke at the Korea Society in 2002 in conjunction with Ty Pak and me at a reading from the ***Kori*** anthology, Choi said she saw herself more as a Southern writer and a Jewish writer than as a Korean American writer, a label she finds too limiting. (Chang-rae Lee and Leonard Chang have also expressed similar sentiments regarding the labeling of ethnic writers in numerous interviews.)

Obviously, such definition and redefinition of the writerly self plays out in sharply different ways according to context. For Korean academics, continuing to struggle with the legacy of recent colonial history and nationalist politics, gestures such as Choi's and Chang-rae Lee's self-redefinition might seem especially charged, particularly when they write novels that focus on Japanese American characters.

Meanwhile, there are Korean American writers who have continued to push boundaries in other ways that make their works increasingly interstitial, that is, employing a style which is not classifiable by any conventional means, such that their work "stands in the space" between two categories.

Of Tales and Enigmas (2004) is a combination of strange stories and essays reminiscent of the works of Jorge Luis Borges, though many of Kang's pieces draw from Korean history and Korean popular culture. The pieces in Kang's collection are purposely enigmatic. They resonate with multiple cultures, they are open-ended, they don't resolve themselves with a conventional plot. Contemporary stories are combined with elements of traditional folktales.

Of Tales and Enigmas was not classifiable into an easy marketing category, and Kang could not place it with a mainstream press. It is being published by Prime Books, a press most noted for its fringe science fiction (and it doesn't even fit easily into their line). It is fortunate that there are now regional and small presses that can take a risk on an idiosyncratic work like Kang's, and it will be interesting to see how this work will be reviewed — whether the literary community or the Asian American community will even register it on their radar.

Jane Jeong Trenka's memoir, ***The Language of Blood***, is another example of the kind of interstitial work that has begun to emerge, but this one is more accessible, and its major influences can be traced directly back to ***DICTEE*** and prominent trends in more mainstream Asian American fiction.

Trenka's memoir is presented as an intermingling of various forms — an ethnic identity jigsaw puzzle, a menu, a screenplay — with chapter division in unglossed Chinese characters. Each single structural feature is one locatable in an earlier prominent Asian American work in the past 15 years. But the general architecture of Trenka's accessible memoir gestures specifically toward ***DICTEE***, a much more enigmatic predecessor, as if to remedy ***DICTEE***'s impenetrability while pointing to it as relevant to Trenka's own particular notion of identity. It is obvious why such a book would be published by a small regional imprint and not a



Jane Jeong Trenka

mainstream press. A mainstream editor would find ***The Language of Blood*** too complex for a memoir.

Gary Pak's new novel, ***Children of a Fireland*** — with its stream of consciousness, newspaper clippings, and teleplays — is structurally similar to ***The Language of Blood*** but, as a narrative, it comes very solidly out of a local Hawaiian tradition. (If we look at Pak's earlier works, ***The Watcher of Waipuna and Other Stories*** [1992] and ***Ricepaper Airplane*** [1998], we can see the trajectory of Pak's literary experimentation.)

Children of a Fireland begins as a mystery story that at first appears to account for the supernatural in a rational way, but as it continues, the novel undermines that expectation in refreshing ways. Not only do we ultimately get a ghost story, but it is one intimately familiar with popular culture subtexts (*The X-Files*, the Hollywood film, ***Ghost***) and the Hawaiian shamanic tradition. And underneath its interstitial structure, ***Children of a Fireland*** is a deeply humanistic novel that gives life to a community of working class people.

THE ROLE OF THE KOREAN ACADEMY

For a long time, Korean American writers like Younghill Kang and Richard Kim were not recognized as Korean writers in Korea because they wrote in English. The Korean Academy (of Literature, in Korea) was sometimes even hostile to them. But recently, Korean American writers are finally welcome under a new and more inclusive vision of Korean literature.

Dafna Zur of the University of British Columbia characterizes this new attitude in her essay, *Covert Language Ideologies in Korean American Literature*. Zur points out that in recent years, Korean scholars have begun to "graciously embrace Korean American writers as an obvious and natural part of Korean literature." They now feel that "Korean American literature is a branch of Korean literature written in English but nonetheless Korean in the issues discussed." That is to say, to the Korean Academy, Korean American literature is now Korean Anglophone literature, a classification that doesn't quite make sense to some American scholars.

Zur summarizes the three main points of this new attitude in the Korean academy:

(1) that Korean American literature has an educational, didactic value to it, in that it informs non-Korean readers about Korea (by employing, for example, Korean words and phrases in the English text);

It is true that many Korean American authors employ such language devices. But in light of some of the works I have discussed above, the next two points seem somewhat limiting:

(2) that Korean American literature attests to and performs 'Koreanness', thus preserving Korean culture for future generations to come; and that

(3) Korean American literature is a part of Korean literature because it discusses issues relevant to Korean culture, namely the process of immigration and the negotiation of identities of Koreans abroad.

The tacit definition applied to Korean American literature by American scholars is that it is writing, in English, by Americans of Korean origin. It is typically assumed that this writing is somehow connected to issues of ethnicity or at least includes a character or narrator who is Korean or Korean American. Whether this literature serves the interests of Koreans is not generally an issue.

In light of the above, the work that best characterizes the three considerations of the Korean Academy is probably not what the Korean or American academics had in mind.

If you follow the Korean rhetoric back to America, it brings us to the anthology ***Surfacing Sadness: A Centennial of Korean-American Literature 1903-2003***, whose contents were translated from the Korean into English (perhaps its most remarkable feature). This type of writing is a category likely to become more prevalent in the near future.

In the afterword to ***Surfacing Sadness***, Yearn Hong Choi, one ▸

of the co-editors, implicitly defines Korean American literature as works by Korean Americans written in Korean, which goes contrary to the general view that Korean American literature is written in English.

Choi also reveals a nationalist rhetoric quite familiar to those in Korean literary studies. He says, "In the intellectual void of the 1970s and 1980s, Korean poets and writers in the United States published their works in Korean-language newspapers, attended Korean churches utilizing their native language, and organized Korean literary societies in metropolitan areas such as Los Angeles, Washington, D.C., New York, Atlanta, Chicago, and San Francisco." He goes on to talk about some of these literary movements and their products, such as *Jipyongsun*, *Miju Munhak*, *Woollim*, *Munhak Saega*, and *Oaegi*, but it is the last two titles that have a distinctly odd and exciting sound to them: Washington *Munhak* and New York *Munhak*. These are all venues through which Korean Americans writing in Korean can get published, but the titles of the last two finally represent, and draw long-overdue attention to, the increasing international culture of Koreans and Korean Americans.

Choi has a set of complaints, partially directed at the American academy. For example, he says, "I was greatly disappointed by Marshall Pihl's total ignorance of Korean literature in the United States, even though he was one of America's most prominent Korean scholars." Choi also complains about Cornell University's East Asia Series, which publishes Korean novels and poetry collections, "but [has] yet to publish Korean American literature." He talks about Korean Studies programs and literature courses in which classic works like the ***Ch'unhyangjon*** and ***Hong'giltongjon*** are studied but contemporary Korean American works are not. He says that "the students' parents are paying their sons' and daughters' tuition yet they are not introduced to their parental works at all. This is a sad state."

Choi's concerns exemplify how the rhetoric and the definitions can be surprisingly disjunctive even when they appear to refer to things that fall into the same category. But his concerns also draw much needed attention to the complex layers of politics concerning Korean American literature.

CONCLUSION

The interests of Korean American writers, Korean scholars and critics, American scholars and critics, the Korean and American readerships, and finally, the publishers, are interwoven in complex ways. Even something that appears as relatively straightforward as the definition of Korean American becomes quite complex in light of particular contexts and the interests they represent.

Writers like Susan Choi may (and probably will) end up entirely shifting categories in the publishing world. Her trajectory and Chang-rae Lee's (and even Leonard Chang's) might be characterized as a literary evolution, but also an sign of growth, that Korean American writers are successfully assimilating into the mainstream of American literature, writing simply as a writers and not as ethnic writers.

Choi, Lee, and Chang have all expressed this desire in the first place. How critics, academics, and readers respond to such gestures remains to be seen, but it is clear that Korean American writers are attempting to have more control over their public personae. As they engage their various readerships, the controversy and discourse generated by their works will only increase the vitality of Korean American writing.

Publishing has changed quite markedly even in the past five years, and I think we will be seeing many more experimental and unclassifiable works coming from small fringe presses, and self-publication via print-on-demand technology. The control that publishers, critics, and academics have traditionally had over literary representation will diminish as regional, local, and even neighborhood presses re-emerge.

Perhaps it is my own wishful projection, but one thing I look forward to is a renewed vitality like that of the old mimeograph culture, the 'zine culture of *Factsheet Five*, or the *samistat* of the former Soviet Union — writing that isn't simply out to make money or establish reputations, but to be read, to be responded to in kind. That is what I hope will characterize Korean American literature in the future.

Hans Insu Fenkl is the author of the novel/memoir ***Memories of My Ghost Brother****, and is on the faculty of the State University of New York, New Paltz. He is director of the Interstitial Studies Institute at SUNY New Paltz.* ●

