

Diaspora Art and Historical Memory of Nathalie Lemoine and Yong Soon Min

Hijoo Son*

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Abstract

What James Clifford calls a “dwelling in displacement” in his seminal article titled “Diasporas” (1994) entails the maintaining of communities and of having collective homes away from homes. This type of existence represents a specific cosmopolitanism that is held in tension between structures of the nation state and assimilationist ideologies. In order to explore this tension, the case of an adopting artist Yong Soon Min and an adapting adoptee Nathalie Lemoine shows a scale of identities and multiple affiliations overseas Koreans maintain. Most studies of overseas Koreans understand those residing abroad as self same entities whose roles and function are understood primarily as intermediaries, pioneers, or future resources that provide potential bases for the expansion of national power outside of the borders of the nation. This essay suggests that such a perspective does not attune with the history of overseas Koreans and their sense of self that is constituted by a complex of inter related histories. In this sense, a historical comparative analysis of two women diasporic

* Assistant Professor, Department of History, Sogang University

artists is part of a larger inquiry into the cultural history of overseas Koreans that works to expand the ethnonationalistic claims of singular or hierarchical conceptions of what it means to be Korean in a global age.

Key words : Korean American migration history, diaspora, cultural identity, art, historical memory, trans national adoptee

1. Introduction

In the contexts of exile, displacement, and diaspora, the places of departure, sojourn, and the ensuing memories of loss and melancholia accompany the many who are “dwelling-in-displacement.” (Adorno 1974, 33-34; Bammer 1994; Clifford 1994; Said 2000). What James Clifford calls a “dwelling-in-displacement” in his seminal article titled “Diaspora” (1994) entails the maintaining of communities and of having collective homes away from homes. For him, this type of existence represents a specific cosmopolitanism that is held in tension between structures of the nation-state and assimilationist ideologies (Clifford 1994, 310). In order to explore this tension, the case of an adopting artist Yong Soon Min and an adapting adoptee Nathalie Lemoine shows a scale of identities and multiple affiliations overseas Koreans maintain. It has been argued elsewhere that nationalism is only one modern orientation of sentiment and self-identification, and the nation-state only one structure of political, cultural and social organization (Berger 2005). In this sense, a historical comparative analysis of two women diasporic artists is part of a larger inquiry into the cultural history of overseas Koreans that works to expand

the ethnonationalistic claims of singular or hierarchical conceptions of what it means to be Korean in a global age.

What makes an inclusive or open approach to understanding and accepting of a scale of identities particularly difficult in the modern era is Korea's colonial experience. The lingering effects of colonial violence and antagonisms as carried out especially under Japan's assimilation policies, impacted post-colonial discussions of not only Korean national identity but also overseas Koreans' sense of self. Most studies of overseas Koreans understand those residing abroad as self-same entities whose roles and function are understood primarily as intermediaries, pioneers, or future resources that provide potential bases for the expansion of national power outside of the borders of the nation-state. Koreans abroad are plotted along linear time-frames or periodizations of migrations resulting from push and pull factors that dictated when they migrated and where they settled. This essay suggests that overseas Koreans' identity formation constitute a complex of inter-related histories that takes into account the contents of specific local histories such as class, race, and gender-related issues as minorities in destination countries as well as global causes of movement such as colonial rule, internecine war and peninsular division, Cold War politics, and globalization.

In teasing out the various actors in this field – artist, art object, discourse, and cultural production – diasporic art brings to light artistic practices in which the activities that surround the vicinity of the art objects themselves are significant socio-political factors describing “dwelling-in-displacement.” That is, maintaining homes away from homes means, for example, that Lemoine and Min's vigilantly continue action-centered

production of art work, and such art objects often have a “life of its own” within the social process of maintaining communities in the destination and departure countries. Two methodological concerns are important to this analysis. First, key to diasporic art is that it explores a shared history of trauma, suffering, or displacement and affectively reconstructs and nostalgically re-imagines artists’ historical memories of such events. Second, by attempting to better understand how cultural production is dependent on and reflective of social relations between these artists and other people as well as objects such as art work, I focus on the awareness of the mediatory role of art objects rather than the interpretation of objects based upon aesthetic or semiotic readings of art.

2. Diaspora

Historically, diaspora has referred to displaced communities of people who were dislocated from native homelands through some type of enforced movement. Today, it has become a ubiquitous signifier of movement and displacement. William Safran explores the term’s semantic field and discusses the varying parameters of its definition.¹⁾ Safran’s

1) Diaspora definitions include : 1) population dispersal from original center to two or more territories; 2) retention of collective memory of the homeland; 3) partial alienation from the host society; 4) aspiration to return to homeland; 5) commitment to the maintenance or restoration of that homeland; 6) derivation of collective consciousness and solidarity from a relationship with the homeland; 7) enduring presence abroad 8) exchange among the spatially separated populations, and the list goes on (Safran 1991, 83; Van Hear 1998, 6).

semantic paradigm is pushed further analytically and theoretically by Cohen and Clifford (Clifford 1994, 304-305; Cohen 1996, 606). James Clifford notes, however, that differences do exist in its usage, and that an invocation of diaspora theories, diaspora discourses, and historical experiences of diaspora are never equivalent (Clifford 1994). Yet, in many writings about diaspora, such distinctions are collapsed, intermixed, or they remain unmentioned. Often, the use of a diaspora begins and ends with reference to the Greek coinage of the term or to the Jewish historical experience.

There are two distinct diasporic characterizations that handicap its usage; one historical, the other contemporary. Historically, diaspora was and often still is imbued with victimhood and suffering because it represents a history of those forcibly dispersed from their birth country, followed by a subsequent destruction of that country. Contemporarily, its usage has included everyone from refugees, immigrants, and alien residents to exiles and expatriates. Nicholas Van Hear argues that “new diasporas” were stimulated greatly by “revolutions” in telecommunications, transport, and ideas, encompassed by a globalizing frenzy of movements and migrations (Van Hear 1998). In contradistinction to such particular definitions, the open-ended usages have conceptually led to universal and ahistorical appropriations of the term as a nebulous space of imagination and difference. Okwui Enwezor describes diasporic space as “the quintessential late twentieth century space, a space in which the terms of modern immigration, exile, loss, nation, subject, and citizen are negotiated and reinvented for various uses” (Enwezor 1997, 86). In another instance, Angelika Bammer combines essays, poetics, and theoretical expositions to

formulate that the separation of people from their native culture or “displacement” is one of the most formative experiences of our century (Bammer 1994).

As a result of these two handicaps, on the one hand, a dizzying array of the invocation of diaspora has clouded the issue considerably in terms of its ahistorical usage, and on the other, a privileging of the Jewish Diaspora as originary departure of examination determined its centrality in diaspora studies (Barclay 1996, Cohen 1996, Gafni 1997). In terms of the latter centrality, Cohen’s treatise is formulated around the duality of a “positive” and “negative” diaspora. The Greeks experienced a “positive diaspora” in the classical period, dispersed as a result of their expansionist policies, military conquest and colonization. The opposing “negative or victim diaspora” sheds light on those who were subject to colonization, with the Jewish case being the most complex and diverse, thus for Cohen, central to understanding diaspora (Cohen 1996). Yet, this centering has become a contentious point of debate and has, for many, trapped the larger questions concerning diaspora into a single case. Even as Cohen upholds the necessity of a scholarly inquiry of the Jewish diaspora (here with lower case “d”) should *not* serve as the normative or central case, but as both a beginning and a focal point of interrogations into diaspora, he still writes that the “origins and implications of the term *have to be assimilated* and understood before it can be *transcended*.” (Cohen 1996, 507, italics mine). In so doing, does Cohen not ultimately reify the term’s Jewishness? The conditions in “tracing back” diaspora are never wholly fulfilled in writing diaspora. Indeed, Cohen himself writes that “there is no place to write a full account of the subsequent vicissitudes of the

Jewish diaspora” (Cohen 1996, 510). Despite this on-going central Jewish hold on diaspora history, the Armenians, Africans, Palestinians, the Irish, and others became salient cases as discussions on diaspora expand. Rather than refer back to a centrality and thus the plight of the Jewish case as the Diaspora, I attempt to reassess the conceptual uses of diaspora by examining two artists’ action-centered expressions that work to create homes away from homes. In this fashion, this essay offers the idea that cultural production and history of diaspora cannot be ordered along distinct positive or negative prescriptions of diaspora nor as a central case of Jewish Diaspora.

3. Korean Migration History, Two Artists’ Movement

Yong Soon Min, who was born in Suwôn, Kyônggi Province in 1953, migrated to northern California in 1960. Although her father had received his college education in Japan at Waseda University, in the aftermath of the Korean War (1950-1953), he found himself working for a U.S. army sergeant, and it was through her father’s link with this sergeant that they were able to immigrate to the U.S. (Yong Soon Min 2002, interview by author). Her mother also worked on a U.S. military base until their departure. Min arrived several years before the U.S. Naturalization and Immigration Act was passed (1965) and in the midst of a time when the Civil Rights and black liberation movements broke down (and built anew) racial barriers and incited revolutionary changes. Min came of age when

newly-arriving immigrants, especially of Asian background, sought out professional jobs in law, medicine, and business to realize their “American Dream.” Very few focused on the fine arts as Min²⁾ who obtained for herself prestigious residencies, including the Independent Study Program of the Whitney Museum (1981) and the National Studio Program of the Institute for Contemporary Art in 1991 (also known as P.S. 1). As well, she has held several teaching positions and artist residencies. Currently, she is associate professor in the Claire Trevor School Studio Art Department at University of California, Irvine. In this manner, Min defined the parameters of her own artistic aspirations and agency.

Certainly, Min is a pioneer in the U.S. context as a first generation Korean American artist, but what Elaine Kim cites as a “burst of cultural forms” that exist today since second- and third-generation immigrants have freedom to choose professions outside of business, law, and medicine and the ability to speak English as their first language was not the case during the time Min chose to study art (Kim 2002, 97). In fact, Kim has written extensively on the making of Asian American subjectivity, especially Korean immigrants whose relations both to the U.S. and homeland is confined and judged in terms of successes and failures, be they the Korean American “model minority” in the U.S. or the “exemplary” overseas Korean or *haeoe tongp’o*. Kim criticizes these essentialist ideals as “mandating” a repression of history, memory and the U.S. imperialist project in her homeland all the while disregarding the social castigation and discrimination faced in the U.S. as minorities. One

2) B.A. 1975, M.A. 1977 and M.F.A. 1979, University of California Berkeley

must recall that the diversity of Asian American artists' access to modes of cultural and artistic representation was wrought out of the cultural politics of the 1960s and 1970s, and that for the many first generation Asian Americans who grew up at this time in the U.S., they sought out a voice for themselves in a discriminating and abject climate when opportunities and social acceptance were not the norm (Kim 2002, 108-111 Kim, et al. 2003, xx).

Born in Pusan 1968, Nathalie Lemoine³⁾ was adopted into a Belgian family in 1969. Lemoine did not leave South Korea of her own choosing since she was raised in Europe as part of a second flow of inter-country or what has recently been called trans-racial adoptions (Hübinette 2006). At four years of age, Lemoine was adopted by a Belgian couple with three other Korean children. Her mother was a social worker, and her father, a banker. She was the second oldest in the group. According to her adoption papers, she was born in June 1965. But in 1991, her birth mother would reveal to her that her actual birth-year was 1968. Therefore, she was only a one year old at the time of her adoption. The journey from a baby adoptee (K. *ibyangin*, 入養兒) to independent adult adoptee (K. *ibangin*, 入養人) with a fuller understanding of "where she came from" is a journey she expresses and documents through art.

A self-proclaimed visual artist, Lemoine was trained in the fundamentals of drawing and painting at St. Luc Art School in Belgium. She put

3) Lemoine goes by various names. Mihee Cho was the name given her by a Pusan orphanage in Southeast Korea; Nathalie Lemoine is her adoptee Belgian name; and Byul Kim is the name her birth mother gave her, which was disclosed to her in 1995. She also uses Star Kim since *byul* means star. I will use Nathalie Lemoine, the name she most uses today, but you will see that she continually invokes all four names in her online profiles, websites, et al.

herself through art school, after becoming economically independent in 1981. She left her home at thirteen years of age (though she thought she was sixteen), never to return, feeling partially responsible for her parents' divorce. She especially wanted independence from her adoptive mother who once asked brashly if Nathalie knew how much it cost to raise a child. Theirs would not be such a happy nor enduring relationship, and although Lemoine has recently moved back to Brussels in 2013, she still does not speak to her adoptive parents. Of her independence, she describes as liberating, the moment when she decided to live "without power control" (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

In art school, she made a short film entitled *Adoption* which was an enactment of a narrated letter from an adoptee to her imagined birth mother questioning from where she came. This short film won the "best scenario" award at the Brussels Short Film Festival in 1988.⁴⁾ As a Korean adoptee, her prize earned her notoriety, and in 1989, she was selected, along with twenty European university students, to participate in a Korean adoptee "home-coming" program sponsored by the Korean government. Two years later, she was asked again by the Korean Embassy to participate in the 1991 Olympic Korean Ethnic Games for Overseas Koreans in Seoul.⁵⁾ This second return trip would be a momentous one: her search for her birth mother proved successful after her "story" was aired on national television. Of their meeting, she writes

4) For a larger discussion on adoptee's self representation through videography, see Eleana Kim 2000.

5) Since Lemoine did not play sports, she somehow negotiated for her friend to take her place in the sporting events of this Olympiad. In effect, she arranged for herself and her substitute to participate in this program (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

that she arrived in a room where a group was waiting for her: “There was a bunch of *ajummas* [older women] from the neighborhood and my aunts, [among whom] one was my mother, but I knew already who my mom was...It was weird. It was like entering into a common field; a known field and we didn’t have to talk about it...I think it was pretty decent, the way we reacted. We didn’t cry like other Koreans. I just wanted to know why” (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

If for the Egypt-born Jewish poet Edmond Jabés, the desert serves as the location of the nomad in trying to locate Jewish dislocation, and writing is “passions for origins” precisely due to the lack of origins, then for Lemoine, an imagined “Korea,” whether symbolically on a canvas of paints or metaphorically on film, serves as a space of exploration for the nomadic adoptee, and adoptee activism as the constant search for origins (Jabés 1991). Working as an adoptee activist and artist, Lemoine was based in Korea since 1993, and for almost twelve years in Seoul, she worked as a liaison-cum-activist representing Korean adoptees. Belgian Korean adoptees created the Euro-Korean League (E.K.L) after Lemoine’s first two visits to Korea, a forum whose mission was to link Korean adoptees to the homeland. E.K.L members asked Lemoine to be their intermediary from Korea, then to work for E.K.L. in Belgium (at the time, the internet had only begun to be accessible!). Over ten years, she succeeded in finding 200 out of 600 queries to find birth parents and/or locating adoption agencies and adoptive papers. This is an amazing figure for a volunteer, working without organizational support. Until the economic crisis of 1997, Lemoine had been working out of a small office space provided by her generous patron, Mr. Cho, a Christian man who

offered his help after learning about her efforts on national television (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

The accumulation of frustrating experiences from her time in Seoul and the constant questioning of Lemoine's affiliation and belonging undoubtedly inform her art work and writing. Throughout her time in Korea, she managed to guide Korean adoptees who traveled to Seoul to fact-find and make birth-family searches. This process informs the social, political, and cultural implications of her art practice as a way to communicate and convey her message. For example, she produced the first adoptees' art exhibition in Korea, and advocated for the right of adoptees to have extended visas, lobbying to bring about (at that time) a new F-4 Visa, what is known today as the *tongp'o* or Overseas Koreans Visa, that allows ethnic Koreans (and their offspring) and adoptees to reside in Korea for up to two years as well as other social benefits.⁶⁾ Lemoine also co-founded provisional artist groups such as KameleonZ, *Han* Diaspora, and KimLeePark Productions. Further, the Korean Overseas Adoptees (the acronym KOA, pronounced, means "orphan" in Korean) is partly a continuation of the European Korean League and is the first adoptees' support group in Korea. Lemoine helped create this nonprofit, independent structure to help consult and advocate for adoption issues and search assistance, serving overall as a link between Korea and overseas

6) Her website provides a full account : www.starkimproject.com Some of her curated shows include *East to West*, *Our children With our Love*, *Space for Shadows* Performances, the visa campaign, the 1999 OAK (Overseas Adoptee Koreans) Calendar, K.A.A.N (Korean American Adoptee Network) Showcase 2000, and most recently the O.K..A.Y. (Overseas Koreans Artists' Yearbook) series. The OKAY yearbook project also has a website : <http://starkimproject.com/okaybooks/>

Korean adoptees.⁷⁾ She has helped co-found several associations that assist adoptees' transition to (residing in) Korea, advocate for their rights, and facilitate the process of finding employment, language training (and other schooling), or social welfare programs for the returnees.

In some respects, Lemoine chose to make Seoul her *de facto* residence borne out of circumstances situated in the 1990s. Having arrived after the 1988 Seoul Olympics during the latter part of a period of economic prosperity, the spectacular story of overseas adoption of Korean children made headlines. Between 1966 and 1999 Korea achieved one of the fastest economic development rates in the world, with its per capita income rising from \$100 in 1960 to \$10,543 by 1996 (Samuel Kim 2000, 85). The public showcasing of inter-country adoptees made hit stories in the press and on television telethon searches for birth families. Moreover, the timing of her two initiating trips to Korea found her in the midst of a group of first and second generation adoptees who were coming of age, unaware of their origins, eager to link their imagined homelands to the real one, and thus, ripe for associational activities. Lemoine took advantage of these conditions to bring light to Korean adoptee issues as well as to reap benefits from a certain sympathetic, social openness and an economic capacity for sponsoring cultural work.

7) Lemoine is less active in such adoptee search activities, but there is a burgeoning body of literature on transnational adoption which is partly collected in the following url : http://www.tobiashubINETTE.se/Korean_adoption_studies.pdf.

Although outdated, there is a 1994 M.A. Thesis written detailing the process of searching for birth parents. Park, In sun, 1994. Haeoeibyanginüi bburich'ajkie kwanhan yŏn'gu [A Study on Searching among Korean Adoptees]. Master Thesis, Ewha University.

4. Diasporic Art and Historical Memory

Reflecting on her body of work, Min states that “since the mid-eighties, my diverse body of work has been regarded within the rubric of identity art. Much of it deals with the intersections of history and memory, as well as the politics of representation. My installations and sculptures often employ narrative strategies that address issues of cross-cultural translation inherent within certain “isms” such as feminism or nationalism. In this respect, my work foregrounds questions of positionality...[that is], the relationships between the center and the periphery within a postcolonial critique - a positioning that is both claimed and put in tension with a position that’s ascribed” (Joselit 1998, 87). It must be remembered that this type of memorializing or “bringing up” memory is informed by Benedict Anderson’s idea of imagined communities that bind national memory “embedded in secular, serial time, with all of its implications of continuity” while “‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity...which engenders the need for the narrative of identity” (Anderson 2006, 205). French Historian Pierre Nora’s (1996) magnum opus *Realms of Memory (Lieux de Memoire)* also marks an epochal point in the field of memory and history through his re-writing of the history of France solely through memory and remembrance objects. His treatment of memory takes it out of the realm of subjective phenomena and into the domain of what he calls *cadres sociaux* (social frames) of collective experience. By taking what are loci memoriae (viz., geographical places, historical figures, monuments and buildings, literary and artistic

emblems, commemorations, and symbols), he is able to demonstrate not only how memory binds communities together and creates social identities but also dramatizes how one's consciousness of the past is symptomatic of the disappearance of certain living traditions (Nora 1996, ix-x). This type of work in memory has inspired a large body of work on memory and material culture. For example, Susanne Kuchler and Walter Melion posit that memory is a social and cultural process that is actively constructed and context-specific, and the various structures and processes of recall and remembering remain inextricably linked to the material act of representation, the artificing hand, or the material properties of image production. In another example, Anne Coombes argues that at a time of tremendous social, cultural and political transformation of mid-1990s South Africa, visual and material cultural manifestations of new public histories proved effective in producing a social transformation in the redefining of formative concepts such as community and nation. It is within this terrain that I read Min and Lemoine's cultural work (Coombes 2003, Hong 2007, Kuchler 1991).

5. Memory and the Body

The intersection of history and memory serve well the representations Min invokes through mixed media installations. She reinstates images of herself, her family, and the forgotten others through portraiture, sculpture, and photos back into history and reconstitutes it. For example, the state

of ravage from which Min's family left South Korea is addressed in a number of her pieces. *Talking Herstory* (1990) is a collage of print images of Potsdam and Yalta Conference leaders including Roosevelt, Stalin, Truman, and Krushchev, juxtaposed next to snapshots of her family from the 1940s and 1950s, unevenly configured onto branches of a family tree.⁸⁾ These leaders of the U.S. and the former Soviet Union were, according to Min, the "deciders of the fate of Korea," and as such, they affected her life and her family's decision to migrate. But by using the pun "herstory" in the title, Min makes the double move to incorporate her own family's story and to tell that story from her, a woman's, perspective, thus affectively demonstrating how the world's most powerful leaders' decisions become directly intertwined with an individual or a family's fate.⁹⁾

The six-part photographic series *Defining Moments* (1994) functions as documentary realism in that a sequential dating of important events is accompanied by photographic manipulations of her body masked with images of war, words such as "DMZ," "occupied," or "territory," and mythical landmarks such as Mount Paekdu. "Yuk-I-O" (six-two-five) of 1953 marks the start of the peninsular war and Min's birth year; "Sa-Il-Gu" (four-one-nine), the 19 April student revolution was an event Min witnessed as a child in 1960; "O-Il-Gu" (five-one-nine), the 19 May Kwangju Massacre of 1980 marks an awakening in Min's political consciousness; and "Sa-I-Gu" (four-two-nine), the 29 April 1992 L.A. Disturbance marks a defining moment as a Korean American. The

8) Yong Soon Min's work can be viewed on her website : <http://yongsoonmin.com>

9) Please go to the following url to see a digitized copy of *Talking Herstory*:
[http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/talking herstory/](http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/talking%20herstory/)

pronunciation of dates marking the beginning of wars, massacres, uprisings, and so on is a tradition South Korean people use in part because the post WWII period has been replete with upheavals and unrest and also due to debates over the naming of events, e.g. was Kwangju an uprising or a massacre? Taking cue from this tradition, the South California Korean College Student Association also calls the events of 1992 April 29, SA-I-GU, not L.A. riot or unrest.¹⁰⁾

When Min literally writes “heartland” across her chest in *Heartland*, she states that it is done “in the way [Korean] activists have used it in the past, to be symbolic of aspirations for unification, [as a way] of looking into the future” (Yong Soon Min 2002, interview by author). *deCOLONIZATION* (1991) is a rhetorical piece, posing the dualities of power that constantly pull at colonized subjects to the point of realizing a Du Boisian “double consciousness.” With each set of discursive splits – nature/nurture, salvage/savage, just/cause, desert/storm, right/might, civilizing/benevolence, free trade/ zone – half are presented in black with a white background and the other half in white on a black background. This installation is framed by an unpainted, ugly tree branch, the “binary fixed tree” from which questions pop up (Yong Soon Min 2002, interview by author).¹¹⁾ In a final example of installation portraiture, *Chōngshindae* takes up the issue of military sexual slavery. The Korean word *chōngsindae*, defined as “volunteer corps,” has become synonymous with the so-called

10) Please go to the following url to see a digitized copy of *Defining Moments*:
<http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/defmomorder/>

11) Please go to the following url to see a digitized copy of *deCOLONIZATION*:
<http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/decolonization/>

“comfort women” who were dragooned off to the war front to service soldiers in the Japanese Imperial Army during the Pacific War. A charcoal-singed ch’ima *chogŏri* (traditional Korean dress) symbolizes the tragic plight of these women, the majority or 200,000 of whom were Korean. A poem that is etched on the collar of this piece signifies Hak-soon Kim’s momentous oral testimony at the United Nations in New York as the first former Korean sex slave to testify in public in 1991.

Half Home (1986) is a five-part installation symbolic of Min’s exposure to and education through the Young Koreans United (YKU) group.¹²⁾ During the 1980s, this association with YKU in New York challenged her to examine her Korean American experience. Min discusses her work with YKU and Asian American Arts Alliance (AAAA) in New York during the 1980s and 1990s as signaling a shift in her artwork and self-understanding. Min helped organize the “Roots to Reality” Show in New York during the early 1990s, one of the first Asian-American art exhibitions. Through this work, she met and got involved with YKU’s cultural troupe, *Binari*, that was participating in Asian American cultural heritage events with *samulnori* (Korean drumming) and *madanggŭk* (Korean popular political theatre).¹³⁾ Their performances took Min on tours along the east coast discussing movement for liberation, democratization, and

12) Please go to the following url to see a digitized copy of *Half Home*
[http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/half home/](http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/half%20home/)

13) For an in depth discussion on *madanggŭk*, see Namhee Lee, “Between indeterminacy and radical critique : madanggŭk, ritual, and protest,” in *Positions : East Asiatic cultures critique* (Winter 2003). Also Chungmoo Choi, “The discourse of decolonization and popular memory : South Korea,” in *Positions : East Asia cultures critique*(Spring 1993).

history of Korea (Yong Soon Min 2002, interview by author). In response, her installation focuses on the categories of memory, history, mother, tongue, and real estate. Addressing the land was her way of addressing the peninsular division in politicized terms. She uses scrolls of tracing paper as “veils” to indicate both literal (physical) layers and metaphorical dimensions (layered history and memory) of understanding of Korean history. There are also three-dimensional relief elements in the form of houses, and in between the “history” and “real estate” sections, she discusses colonialism, leading up to the division of Korea, signified by red-striped patterns of the Japanese flag and the infamous image of three blind-folded Koreans executed by Japanese soldiers.

Whirl War (1987) is an attempt on sound play, or word play on the division and Korean War, weaving in her desire to highlight the matriarchal history of shamanism in Korea.¹⁴⁾ There is a division on one wall with a stenciling of the letters “DMZ” next to a newspaper headline that states, “Half the world does not know how the other half lives.” Any engagement with Min’s personal narratives brings evidence to a belief that national identity is imagined and historical memory constructed, and that both are contingent upon the present.

Yong Soon Min has carved a place for herself and has created a discursive dialogue, in communication with feminist, artistic and academic circles within and outside of Korea. She came of age when multiculturalism had popularly emerged and then lost its political effectiveness. The art critic and curator Kobena Mercer concludes that multiculturalism reached

14) Please go to the following url to see a digitized copy of *Whirl War*:
<http://www.yongsoonmin.com/art/whirlwar/>

a saturation point after Jean-Hubert Martin's "Magiciens de la terre" (1989), "The Other Story" (1989), "The Decade Show" (1990), reaching its dénouement with the 1993 Whitney Biennial. This out-modedness was coupled with a loss of the National Endowment for the Art's funding in the U.S. and a dismantling of the Arts Council in Great Britain during the early 1990s. The combination - of structural changes along with the cultural saturation point of non-conventional artists - allowed the art market a greater hand in dictating funding opportunities. Mercer writes that "artists of color are welcomed in the expanding circuits of biennial s...and this may often be accompanied by the unstated awareness that you will probably look a bit dumb if you make a big deal about difference" (Mercer 1998, 43). I am surprised to hear Min describe herself as being in a "mid-career" lag as an artist, feeling a loss of momentum, even as she is showing recently-made video work critical of South Korea's foreign migrant workers. She states, "I think the loss of momentum is parallel to what is happening with the movement in Korea as well...there is a lot of questioning now, of the 1980s *minjung* (peoples') movement and the kind of confidence they [Korean activists] might have had about reunification which is no longer the case now. It is so much more of a complex situation now and after my own trip to North Korea, I have to question my own assumptions and political beliefs/positions. It's all a big part of this big pause...in my thinking" (Yong Soon Min 2002, interview by Hijoo Son).

6. *Ibyangin/Ibangin* (Adoptee/Alien)¹⁵⁾

Lemoine expresses in nuanced ways the questioning of her sense of self and belonging through the medium of language and translation in her art work. She uses her action-centered art to resist certain stereotypes and to gain ground for fellow adoptees. Yet, at the same time, the categories she found herself placed into by the larger South Korean media and public—adoptee, artist, woman, Francophone, foreigner, queer—were restricting. Therefore, she continues to explore cultural fields, combining artwork and activism. What most confronted her when she arrived in South Korea was something that she had never expected: her appearance, her dress, and her behavior as a woman. Thus was born the “Ugly Beauty [美]” or “Ugly Me” show.¹⁶⁾ She states, “I never felt that ugly in Europe...I never felt that I was that pretty, but if you [dated] boys, you are integrated in society; and because I could only get a certain type [of men in Seoul], it didn’t make me feel like a woman...I felt that the image of having sex, in the European terms was very different from Asia and the whole experience of it. So I thought that I’m just not the ‘right’ woman here...” (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

After initial rounds of showcasing to a Korean audience, she got tired of the constant “who are you?” questioning of her Belgian/Korean background that centered on a rundown category of “ethnic art.” Her solution was to escape into “Konglish,” or creolizing the three languages she had to speak to survive: Korean, English, and her native French. She

15) KimLeePark Productions defined *ibyangin* as adoptee and *ibangin* as alien.

16) The Chinese character “mi” 美 means beauty.

experimented phonetically and visually, translating language and transcribing sounds in French or English into Korean, trying to see if people would catch the nuanced puns at play. She takes images from everyday life, subverts the language and redeploys its signifiers. In one example, she targets the Korean media.

There was this show on SBS [national TV station] called *Wuri Ibyang, Wuri Sarang uro* (“Our Adoptees, Through Our Love”). I played with that as *wuri ibang* (“our alien”) because we are *ibang* (aliens in Korea) and also because it’s a play on word: *Wuri ibyangin, wuri ibangin* (“Our Adoptees, Our Aliens”). I like to play with known sentences in Korean culture. It was very specific in 1996 about Korean adoptees because it was the year that they were supposed to stop adoption abroad...It was a “golden year” in Korea [economically], so the media asked why they [Korean government] still sends five, six children a day abroad? It was a great year to make what we wanted known, and that’s when we said that we didn’t want to be called adopted children *ibyangin* and started the visa signature [campaign] (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

Taking a sympathetic Korean view of *ibyangin* (adoptee child), Lemoine remakes the image of *ibyangin* (adopted person) and associates it with the *ibangin* (the alien), and if I take her cue, perhaps *ibangin* can refer equally to the alienation many adoptees experience upon their return to South Korea. Moreover, this word-play is reinvigorated with a political agenda by KimLeePark Productions in adoptees’ fight to attain the right for the F4 visa.

Lemoine herself states that she did not really like Korea on her first trip back, a time when the bright and upbeat presentations of

government or other official representatives queried her. “I don’t forget that I was put into an orphanage, and that it’s not that great [for Korean government] to hide that. I was not disappointed because I did not have expectations, but I felt that it was very much a culture of lies” (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author). She explores language and is engaged in the poetics of the Korean alphabet and language as well as the Chinese script and calligraphic form. It was the arena of language that provided her with resistance to such a culture of lies, including her age, why she was adopted, and what would force her birth mother to give her daughter up. She did not speak the language for the duration of her residence in Seoul, and to this day, she does not speak fluently. If it is true that “all families invent their parents and children, give each of them a story, character, fate, and even a language,” then what Said writes in the first line of his memoir *Out of Place* has particular pertinence for those hundred thousands of adoptees (Said 1999, 3). When one’s parents have different physical features, speak a language that does not help them upon return to their birth lands, nor have those tales of history, superstition, not to mention the rituals and observances of everyday life, how is one to speak fluently? How is one to translate into language what one barely possesses? This is how Lemoine remembers her adoptive mother when they were young:

She’s blond and she’s got this Russian hair, like Afro-Russian which isn’t common anyway. When we were with my father, it didn’t matter, not as strange because he was darker. But my mother was different; she looked different and she was kind of aggressive when people were looking at us

strange...In the train, or wherever we were. She was very conscious of it, but we couldn't do anything about that. We [asked ourselves], do we have to get blond hair? It's not her fault either, but who can tell her not to behave this way? In some way, it was out of love, because she wanted to protect us, but it wasn't protecting us at all (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

While she describes her adoptive parents as distant, she uses metaphor of a “common field” to describe her reunion with her birth mother. The distinction poignantly speaks to the imaginings, questions, pain, and fear that come with the unknowing possibility of reunions between adoptee and birth family and of revisiting a past of memory and loss. Lemoine addresses the issue of Asian adoptees in Europe and their reveries in the following way :

Yes, of course, it's [reunion] an illusion...but they can dream about that. If you don't dream about something then you can never have access to anything...It wasn't like we typed on the internet and knew about Korea...Adoptees didn't have that much information, so we were fantasizing about Korea. They would ask if Korea would accept me and love me back? Not especially the birth family, but how Korea would look at them? And so it was a lot about looking [reflexively] at themselves (Nathalie Lemoine 2002, interview by author).

7. Conclusion

Of the newly emerging reformulations of diaspora, Cohen indicates that

the most adventurous concept is the suggestion that diasporas can be constituted by acts of the imagination. For inherent in sentiments and affective affiliation with co-ethnicity lay possibilities for creative endeavors. The point is that “transnational bonds no longer have to be cemented by migration or exclusive territorial claim,” nor, I would add, the telos of return to the homeland (Cohen 1996, 516-517). Further, the end product of diasporic associations is not limited to a political project or the creation of a homeland; it can result in cultural work and creative connections. This diasporic ability is similar to what Said highlighted as those furtive “exilic pleasures.” For the exiled such as Said, he deployed literary critical practice, as a practice of displacement, to unfold creative affiliations and worldliness.

I propose that diasporic artists such as Lemoine and Min prove that assessments of artistic production can occur on both local and international fields of production; thus, their work and the social indices that surround their cultural production work to reconstitute a history of individuals such as adoptees or diasporic artists while at the same time understanding the global structural forces that push and pull migrants. Diasporic art speaks in *both* directions – as part of an imagined nation’s art that incorporates history, religion, territory and myth *and* an individual’s unique experience. That is, their subject formation works toward building and supporting while at the same time disassembling and disrupting these very national narratives. Stuart Hall is famous for conceiving of a pluralist paradigm of collective frameworks, that mark, but do not define, individual memory, challenging the “single plot” of national identity (Hall 1990). Diasporic paradigms do not necessarily

preclude nationalism and nationalist frameworks they work within them, to challenge and reconstitute them. In this sense, Edward Said has linked nationalism as having risen, in part, from those disconnected or removed forcefully from that nation : “All nationalisms in their early stages develop from a condition of estrangement” (Said 2000, 176). The case of adopting artists and adapting adoptees shows diasporic art and its cultural production can work toward supporting Korean national identity at the same time that it can challenge it.

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〈국문초록〉

민영순과 Nathalie Lemoine의 디아스포라의 예술과 역사의 기억

손 희 주

James Clifford가 그의 논문 “Diasporas”(1994)에서 말하는 “dwelling-in-displacement”는 공동체와 모국 혹은 고향으로부터 멀리 떨어진 공동체의 유지를 뜻한다. 이러한 형태의 생활양식은 국민국가적, 그리고 동화작용적 개념의 구조 내에서 형성되는 갈등인 특수한 코스모폴리탄주의를 나타낸다. 본 논문은 이러한 갈등을 살펴보기 위해 선택된 예술가 민영순 그리고 입양 후 적응해 나가는 Nathalie Lemoine의 사례를 이용한다. 이와 같은 사례는 해외 한인들이 가지는 정체성의 규모와 복합적인 소속들을 보여준다. 해외 한국인을 다루는 많은 연구들은 그들의 역할과 기능을 중개자, 개척자, 혹은 미래의 자산으로만 보는 1차적인 이해 하에서 이루어졌다. 이러한 연구는 국민국가의 경계를 벗어나 민족국가의 힘을 팽창시키는 데 큰 기반을 제공해주는 것이었다. 따라서 대부분은 해외한국인을 한국인 그 자신(self same)으로 보는 경향이 있었다. 이에 본 논문은 이러한 관점으로는 해외한인의 역사와 상호관련된 역사의 복잡성으로 구성된 그들의 자의식을 설명할 수 없음을 밝히고자 한다. 어떤 의미에서 두 명의 디아스포라적 예술가의 역사적 비교분석은 해외한인의 문화사의 넓은 범위에서의 연구이다. 그리고 이는 글로벌 시대 속의 한국인으로서 단일한 혹은 정치적인 공간개념의 민족국가적 틀을 확장시킬 수 있다.

주제어 : 한인 이민사, 문화 정체성, 디아스포라의 예술, 역사의 기억, 초국가적 입양

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