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Introduction to “Diasporic Art and Korean Identity”

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Overview

This special issue of *Cross-Currents*, titled “Diasporic Art and Korean Identity,” is the fruit of a two-day conference on “Korean Diaspora and the Arts” held at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem in May 2017. The contributors explore new delineations of the political, social, cultural, and emotional landscapes inhabited by Koreans living in diaspora. Korean diasporic artists investigate the meaning of “Koreanness” through their paintings, political cartoons, theater, film, documentary, photographs, and multimedia art. The topic of diaspora—which Gabriel Sheffer defines as “ethnic minority groups residing and acting in host countries while maintaining material and sentimental ties to their homelands”—has received impressive scholarly attention in the humanities and social sciences, and Korean diaspora studies has been part of this trend (Sheffer 1986, 3).

Seven million Koreans currently live outside the Korean peninsula, making them the fifth largest diasporic population at a time when 250 million people worldwide live outside their homelands. This special issue on Korean diasporic art presents creative expressions of a shared history of trauma, suffering, or displacement, affectively reconstructed or nostalgically reimagined, produced in China, Cuba, Japan, Kazakhstan, South Korea, and the United States. The contributors demonstrate how artists are particularly able to captivate audiences and innovate ways of articulating the multiple aspects of the everyday condition of diasporic existence *in situ*. In this sense, art possesses the potential to lead us beyond dichotomies. In particular, Korean diasporic artists’ experiences and expressions pose questions about the North and South Korean states’ efforts to manage and understand cultural belonging that have, in turn, worked to homogenize Korean identity. Such efforts can backfire on state policies and strategies concerning overseas Koreans and displaced communities as they marginalize certain diasporic individuals or groups and, even more, reify others. Thus, state promotion of a “national identity” and definitions of cultural belonging pose a serious challenge to grasping the complexity of Korean diasporic identity (Smith 1991, 16–18).

In response, this issue has three specific objectives: (1) to comprehend the

contingencies of diasporic subjectivity from a multisite perspective, especially as “re-diasporizations” occur more often and to more people; (2) to convey the importance of diasporic artists and their art’s agency by incorporating macro, meso, and micro levels of understanding and analysis; and (3) to interlink, and thereby reduce, the distance between scholarship produced in Korean- and English-language publications. The contributors to this issue investigate Korean diasporic subjectivities formed according to temporal and spatial realities. These subjectivities attend to the ways diasporic agencies manifest themselves in artworks and creative processes that enable us to apprehend and ground Korean diasporic identity within lived experiences.

New Directions in Studies of Korean Diaspora

During the last two decades, studies of Korean diaspora have experienced significant development in both Korean- and English-language publications. Why has there been an expanding interest in diaspora studies, especially in the Korean language (Sŏ and Yi 2014)? One way of answering this question is to ponder the various positions concerning diaspora, especially their approaches to and treatment of the growing community of overseas Koreans. South Korea’s approach has been to seize and capitalize on the growing “co-ethnic” people power for economic, cultural, and political gains. The most salient examples include Chŏnnam University’s Research Center for Overseas Koreans Business and Culture (Chŏnnam taehakkyo segye hansang munhwa yŏn’gudan), created to mobilize Koreans abroad as economic and political resources;¹ Yi Kuhong’s (1975, 1979, 1990) and Lee Kwanggyu’s (1983–2006) cultural incorporation of Koreans abroad as future resources (*mirae ūi chasan*) and extended kin (*tanil minjok*); Han’guk imin chaedan (Korea Immigration Service Foundation 2016a, 2016b), No Yŏngdon’s (2003), and Yoon In-Jin’s (2004, 2005) continued work on policy and legal ramifications in state formulations of overseas Koreans; Kim and Ma (2011) on the meaning of expanding diaspora for the Christian mission, among many other examples of the growing Korean Christian diaspora;² repatriation efforts for those living in diaspora (Kookmin taehakkyo Han’gukhak yŏn’guso 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Yi 2004); and the recognition of overseas Koreans and their struggles to reclaim national independence (*minjok undong*) (Kim 2011; Yonsei University Institute of Korean Studies 2003; Yi 2004; and Yun 2005).

In addition, pioneering studies in the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, and literature have focused on the economics of Korean people’s experiences of voluntary and forced migration (Yu 2011). These studies also describe the preservation of “Koreanness” by migrants and overseas Koreans as they adapt to their host countries.

¹ See the website for the World Association of Global Diaspora Studies, an organization founded and supported by Chŏnnam University and active until 2016: http://www.wadis.or.kr/cms/bbs/dk_content.php?ht_id=dia0101. See also its journal, *Korean Diaspora Studies* (*Tiasŭp’ora yŏn’gu*), founded in 2007.

² See <http://sites.bu.edu/koreandiaspora/>; <https://www.facebook.com/KoreanDiasporaNetwork>.

Some of the earliest texts representative of this migration history (the term “diaspora” was not used in the 1970s) include the publications by Bong Youn Choy (1971), Warren Y. Kim (1959), Oemubu (Ministry of Culture, 1962) in South Korea, Ko Sŭngjae (1973), Hyung-chan Kim (1977), and Hyung-chan Kim and Wayne Patterson (1974).

It is important to consider the circumstances under which these publications were written. The fact that the urgent project of building the nation was first and foremost on the minds of intellectuals in the post-1945 era may be a reason for the predominant number of writings on Korean Americans. In other words, nationalist scholars produced knowledge about “co-ethnics,” or overseas Koreans, in an era when reconstructing the newly independent sovereignty in the aftermath of Japanese colonialism took precedence. The overall conclusion drawn from the early historiography and literature on diaspora reflects the master narrative of overcoming the long and arduous history of suffering and the devastation of the nation. Even in the most recent publications, the specific conditions of Korea’s historical experience as a nation that continually struggles for recognition among the major powers in East Asia remain important to policy, law, and citizenship. Chulwoo Lee, a leading scholar of policy and legal provisions of diasporic populations, highlights “ethnizenship” as part of the administrative practices of identifying and recognizing applicants for citizenship: “Korea’s unique taxonomy of ethnicity and practice of governmentality... sanctifies common ancestry as the essence of both citizenship and ethnizenship to the extent of requiring proof of biological ties with resident citizens or ancestors when determining an applicant’s membership status” (2012, 85). As a consequence of putting the nation first, the study of those living in diaspora as a field of historical inquiry becomes written as a derivative, chronological, and linear history, in reaction to and as a reflection of international conflicts and power struggles in pioneering studies and as overdetermined subjects in contemporary diaspora studies. In these texts, readers rarely discover the complex, difficult-to-explain experiences on the personal or micro level, or the myriad intimate experiences that beset the Korean diaspora. Some of these stories unveil themselves in this issue’s exploration of diasporic art and Korean identity.

Contrary to the Korean-language sources that are determined by national allegiance and state boundaries, English-language sources represent diasporic subjects as flexible, malleable, and, at times, indeterminate. Several scholars have carried out empirical and theoretical research on diaspora and overseas Koreans. They include but are not limited to Edward Taehan Chang and Hesung Chun Koh (2001), Grace M. Cho (2008), Hesung Chun Koh (2008), Seong-Kon Kim and So-Hee Lee (2004), John Lie (2008), Hyung-chan Kim (1974, 1997), Wayne Patterson (1974, 1994, 2000), Sonia Ryang (1997, 2000, 2008), Suh Kyungsik (2005, 2006). Building upon these studies and others, a slew of more recent publications also focus on this topic (Jo 2018; Kim and Ma 2011; Park 2018; Ryang and Lie 2009; Tsuda and Song 2019).

In his introduction to the second edition of *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen (2008, xv) notes that whereas a search of “diaspora” in the Library of Congress database during the mid-1990s yielded a few hundred hits, by 2007 there were more than 2,503

results, while Google yielded 14 million hits. Responding to the question of why there has been expansive interest in Korean diaspora studies, then, is easier in the English-language sources, since the widening conditions of diasporic existence makes more space to counter master narratives with alternative narratives within the histories of diaspora. Such expansion has widened the topics of investigation to include many more ethnic groups and other social formations undefined by religion, race, or even nation when considering diasporic populations. As a result, in the case of Korean diaspora studies, regions beyond the predominant five cases of Korea diaspora communities in China, Japan, Russia, the Commonwealth of Independent States, and the United States have recently have received more scholarly attention (Ch'oe 2003; Kim 2004; Kim, Kim, and Cho 2012; Mun 2006; Park 2003; Yi 2004). This widening of regional focus enhances the understanding of the experiences of Koreans living in diaspora, entangled as they are in the relationship between the global and the local and thus requiring consideration from both transnational and intercultural perspectives. However, there is still a long way to go. Although writings about the repatriation of stateless Sakhalin Koreans in the post-World War II era (Kim 2004; Yi 2004) and a book of photos from the Central Asian states (Kim, Kim, and Cho 2012) are refreshing additions to the literature, they nonetheless are still underscored by the story of abandonment and victimization. By bridging the gap between Korean- and English-language publications on the topic of Korean diaspora, we hope that this special issue will encourage greater cross-pollination, and future studies will pay attention to the as-yet-unheard stories of loss, pain, and overcoming.

In particular, this issue aims to contribute to the burgeoning study of Korean diaspora by presenting ways to think about how art can articulate the histories and cultures of Korean diaspora communities as multiply situated and newly contextualized. The newness is reflected in three important ways. First, the contributors closely engage with diasporic artists, their works, and the trajectories of their physical, intellectual, and emotional movements as an attempt to explore possibilities that intervene, disrupt, and destabilize the conventional “master narratives” of the ethno-nation based upon ethnic homogeneity (*tanil minjok*) and pure-blood relations (*sunsu hyŏlt'ong*) that dominate Korean migration history and diaspora studies (Son 2012, 156–158). As the artworks produced by and about Japanese and Chinese Koreans, adoptees, and Cuban Korean and North Korean refugees attest, the contingencies of a diasporic subject in terms of the historical, political, social, and cultural conditions of life means that he or she must undergo a continuous transformation of identity. For example, one individual living as a colonized Korean subject in Manchuria or Japan during the Pacific War then had to identify as a Chinese Korean *Chosŏnjok* in post-Revolution China. Another individual, who assumed the identity of a *Zainichi* in post-1965 Japan after the normalization of South Korean and Japanese relations, faced a different set of circumstances in their lives with the ability to claim South Korean citizenship (Son 2012). The movement from colonial Korea to the Hawaiian sugar plantations, the coast of California, Mexico, and finally Cuba—as documented by Michael Vince Kim’s photo essay in this issue—shows

another set of contingencies. Living in diaspora is a dynamic process; thus, static conceptions of identity are of limited use. Robin Cohen (1996) and other scholars of diaspora refer to “re-diasporization,” or the concept of multiple migrations, a defining aspect of diaspora that also explains the shifting needs for multisite studies (Marcus 1995, 102).

Second, in order to map out the interrelationships, associations, and spheres of confluence among these multiple sites, the contributions to this issue necessarily include comparative histories of migration, nation, art, artists, and cultural production on macro (global and national), meso (local), and micro (intimate and personal) scales of understanding and analysis. Artistic interventions that embed all three levels of analysis, then, aid in presenting in *one* artist or *one* body of work the contingencies of diasporic life. As well, an analysis of diasporic visual culture that surrounds an art object brings together the voices of overseas Koreans on multiple levels in reading art, incorporating both the unevenness of “high” and “low” art practices and a cross-disciplinary model that consolidates discourse, ideology, and methodology about studies in Korean history, migration history, art history, diaspora studies, visual culture, film, and photojournalism. Yet, the divergent expressions that convene in this issue remain, essentially, an act of writing from the vantage point of diasporic subjects. Furthermore, the communication among the audiences, artists, and artworks in intimate, local, and global contexts possesses great potential for the meaning-making of Korean diasporic identities, because it is multidirectional and indeterminate in different geographical and cultural locations. This issue of *Cross-Currents* thus stages the open possibility of defining Korean diasporic identities again and anew. That is, investigations into the lives of artists and art practices and their communication with the audience highlight how conventional narratives of cultural belonging and political inclusion have constricted the understanding of Korean identity and constrained the management of numerous groups of overseas Koreans and displaced subjects. Now, more than ever, these groups challenge administrative formulations of diaspora. In many ways, then, the geographical, cultural, and emotional trajectories of an artist and her artwork become her own critical juncture that produces the questioning, rather than affirmation, of the homogeneous notion of “Koreanness.”

Third, the conjuncture of understanding the contingent, multiply situated position of diasporic art and artists holds promise and potential to bridge the gap between Korean diaspora literature in Korean- and English-language publications. On the one hand, as discussed earlier in this section, there has been a growing interest in studies of Korean diaspora in many parts of the world including South Korea in recent years. Although this academic interest is welcome, our comparison of these two linguistic spheres of Korean diaspora literature reveals some problems and challenges that hinder further development in the scholarship in Korea, namely, the tendency to capitalize upon diaspora populations as “global partners in development” (Bergsten and Choi 2003; Song 2014), the prioritization of the Korean people’s attempt to preserve “Koreanness” in their host countries, and the nation-focused historiography of Korean

diaspora. The contributors address these problems in their discussions of artists and their works, attempting to enrich scholarly dialogues between publications in Korean and English.

Korean Diaspora and Diasporic Art

As more and more people have gained transnational mobility, can new types of overseas Koreans—such as cosmopolitan mothers temporarily living abroad for their children’s education and expatriate Koreans migrating for work or study abroad in places like Mongolia, Philippines, or the United Arab Emirates—be regarded as newly emerging categories in Korean diaspora (Park and Abelman 2004)? Can we also categorize those who escaped from North Korea and settled in South Korea or elsewhere as part of diaspora? For those North Koreans residing in South Korea, the tripartite labeling as “defectors-asylum seekers-refugees” is no longer a viable form of state identification, because they are “penetrant migrants” who demonstrate the conundrum of living in diaspora *in Korea* as fully “Korean” and also wholly not “Korean” (Chung 2009, 2014). Are they then diasporic even when they migrate from one side of the division to the other? Do diaspora cultures also include adult transnational adoptees who experience displacement especially upon returning to their birth country? The stories revealed in this special issue aim to show that movements of people on a global scale are tied to the local histories and social conditions of individual lives, which ultimately encourage us to renew our approach to Korean identity beyond ethnic and national boundaries. As Korean American artist Y. David Chung describes in his interview in this issue, the concept of Korean diaspora and Korean identity depends upon a “pivot” point that then works to recalibrate an understanding of Korean identity and cultural belonging away from the South Korean vantage point.

Just as the definition “Korean diaspora” is putative, the term “diasporic art” is also disputable. Who names a “diaspora,” and what exactly is “diasporic art”? We have attempted to answer the latter question as creative, affective, and at times, nostalgic re-imaginings through art, but still, these are pressing questions that all of our contributors attempt to answer. In addition to the unsettled process of addressing those questions, the contributors also raise a collective question of what art does for diasporic artists and their audiences by thinking through the cultural values that are communicated in the local and transcultural contexts of the production and consumption of art works.

We suggest that a network of relationships surrounds a particular art object or artworks in specific interactive and transcultural settings. On the one hand, the reading of art involves extracting the objects’ meaning and significance and discussing the artwork critically within artistic or aesthetic movements and contextually within the history of art to assess its cultural, economic, or aesthetic value. On the other hand, viewing and experiencing artwork happens in a historically specific setting—in this case, a setting that is largely Korean and diasporic. That is, the vantage point is not just

object-based but also historically specific under social and political conditions that are imbued with this history. Global theories of people and sociological theories of art premise their arguments on the idea that daily, individual encounters of people, things, and institutions are an integral part of writing history and such encounters can open up new meanings beyond the formal properties of artworks precisely because “objects are not what they were made to be but what they become” (Thomas 1991,4). Alfred Gell goes so far as to claim artworks as “persons” themselves in the sense that network(s) of social relations that form around the vicinity of the art object and surround particular artworks in specific interactive settings mediates social agency (Gell 1998, 6). The methodological view of experiencing the artwork from the network of relations that surround it also demonstrates that artworks attract multivariate responses as they move across cultural and transactional domains. Similar arguments have been made for examining fiction in the postmodern context, placing emphasis on the production and reception processes in addition to the text itself. The analysis takes place, then, “within an entire communication situation which includes the social, ideological, historical and aesthetic contexts in which those processes and that product exist” (Hutcheon 1988, 40–41). In other words, specificity of context surrounding the vicinity of the art object goes beyond modernist calls for self-reflexivity and situates discourse in a broader context.

Unpacking the Multiple and Multisite Narratives

In this special issue of *Cross-Currents*, three articles, an interview, and a photo essay further the discussions on identity and cultural belonging. The contributors convey that artistic media and creativity can project a range of the emotions experienced in and created by diasporic lives. The three articles by Ji-yoon An, Iain Sands, and Hijoo Son address this connection through the narratives of multiple diasporic individuals in their respective geographic, cultural, and historical locations. The artwork, films, and performance art discussed present visual cues that ignite diasporic Koreans’ stories through art. Artist and professor David Chung reflects on his artistic exploration of “Koreanness” over the last three decades, and the images in Michael Vincent Kim’s photo essay animate the multiplicity of “Koreanness.”

In “The Forgotten Childhoods of Korea: Ounie Lecomte’s *A Brand New Life* (2009) and So Yong Kim’s *Treeless Mountain* (2009),” Ji-yoon An analyzes two autobiographical films that are based on the filmmakers’ childhood memories. These films are significant on a diegetic level. Their narratives of abandonment—which address broader social issues such as international adoptions, dysfunctional families, and the Korean diaspora and, at the same time, focus on a child’s perspective—eliminate the often tempting over-sentimentalization of the narratives of transnational adoptees. An argues that the contentious issue of the narrative that is “camouflaged” behind the child’s eyes is, in fact, communicated by the striking cinematography of both films. An’s analysis of the films’ cinematography and narratives

raises provocative questions concerning a “Korean experience” and the definition of “Korean film.”

In “Performing in the ‘Cultural Borderlands’: Gender, Trauma, and Performance Practices of a North Korean Women’s Musical Troupe in South Korea,” Iain Sands challenges the ethnonational conception of Korean diaspora by focusing on North Korean women’s dance and performance theater in South Korea. Insofar as the women experience trauma during their escape from North Korea, Sands observes, their experiences in South Korea can be equally traumatic due to the various obstacles they face. However, the women negotiate new identities in South Korea, and their dance performances demonstrate the ways in which they willingly transform their gendered and marginalized position. Sands’s discussion of a particular dance performance by the all-female North Korean troupe P’yŏngyang Minsok Yesultan articulates how performance practices, as affective sites, have the potential to empower the women and eventually restore their agency.

In “The Diasporic Intimacy and Transindividuality of Artists Himan Sŏk (1914–2003) and Jun Ch’ae (1926–),” Hijoo Son analyzes diasporic art in terms of the intimate transpersonal relations that surround the art of Chinese *Chosŏnjok* artist Sŏk and Japanese Korean *Zainichi* artist Ch’ae. Intimacy is an important context in which Son examines diaspora in order to focus on the individual conditions of art-making as well as global conceptions of diaspora (both of which have appealed to celebratory, emancipatory, pessimistic, or even catastrophic formulations about diaspora and art). Son’s overarching observation—that these artists’ works are neither structured from above nor resistant from below—thus expresses an idea of doubleness bound by both collective and individual experience of diaspora. The transnational relations surrounding the artists and their artworks, Son argues, underscore the idea of multiple forms of selves that are pertinent to diasporic artists who are postcolonial subjects. In this sense, the artists are transindividuals, “a critical concept of integration in understanding identity,” because it allows for differing “selves” according to context-specific settings.

An in-depth conversational interview with Korean American artist Y. David Chung presents an artist’s engagement with diaspora in his art practice that spans nearly three decades. Although Chung began showing his works in the United States in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he has expanded his (and his audiences’) geographical and conceptual frameworks of “Korean diaspora” by producing multimedia work on Koreans in the post-Soviet states and North Korean refugees in South Korea in multiple locations, such as South Korea, North Korea, and Kazakhstan. Basing his discussion on his observation that the concept of “Korean diaspora” is tricky, Chung provides insights into how his interaction with diasporic communities and individuals became an important source of inspiration for his work.

Michael Vince Kim questions the meaning of Korean identity in his photo essay and artist statement, “Far from Distant Shores: Identity Limbo in the Korean Diaspora.” Born and raised in Argentina, Kim has been exploring “Koreanness” from multiple

vantage points. The arresting images of diaspora individuals and communities and natural and human-made objects in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Mexico, and Cuba tell stories of deprivation, empowerment, adaptation, and connection. These poetic snapshots of Korean diaspora from geographically and culturally different locations make it seem as if we are looking into Korean diaspora “through a broken mirror that reveals the vestiges of a shared past,” as Kim states, but also provide a record of Kim’s journey in search of Korean identities through art making.

Conclusion

The distinction between master and counter narratives within the histories of diaspora, or the schism between studies of Diaspora with a capital “D” and diaspora with lowercase “d,” is still significant today. Taking into account Edward Said’s (2000) and James Clifford’s (1994) genealogies of creative societies as part of anti-foundational, and therefore non-nationalist, positions, it is important to consider intellectual efforts, economic forces of cultural industries, and the arts profession as equally integral to a study of diasporic cultural production. Some studies of diaspora have tried to claim a middle ground between constructionist (lowercase diaspora) and essentialized (i.e., nation-centered, uppercase Diaspora) identity. However, that is *not* the aim of this issue. The discursive strategies of “middle ground” and “in-between-ness” in terms of cultural identity have, and continue to be, explored through cultural studies and also recently through new media studies (Bammer 1994; Bhabha 1994; Hall 1990). Although the contributors to this issue acknowledge the strategic merit of theory in terms of its critical distance from any deterministic nodes of identity formation, the research in this special issue presents new ground rather than affirming an interstitial “middle ground.” These newly encountered and observed works formulate a reading of art that unpacks multiple and multisite narratives beyond the binary of master and counter narratives. In addition, the use of culturally constructed theory runs the risk of diluting this issue’s aim to identify the new grounds for exploring diaspora identity in specific historical and social contexts, thus reconsidering the terms of the “myths” of Korean diaspora that remain for some false and untrue, yet for others unassailable and legitimate.

It is impossible to forward any debate or engage in critical dialogue with North and South Korean specialists in the field of Korean diaspora studies without acknowledging the writing of national history as necessary for certain positions, even as critical challenges are posed against these categories of the nation-state. In other words, the national agenda will not disappear. Despite their geographical distance from each other, Koreans in Central Asia, Mexico, Japan, China, and Cuba are unequivocally part of a history of Korean migration, and their emotional and cultural affiliation with “Koreanness,” however complex or straightforward, cannot be adequately explained without providing the history of colonialism and division, contestation over “postcoloniality,” and the ongoing politics of a divided nation. Therefore, national history falls far short of explaining the existence of the “greater number” of Korean

international adoptees, and perspectives and policies based on nation-state categories can neither understand nor rectify their trauma of displacement and abandonment. Despite the fact that the national narrative of deprivation under colonialism and the Korean War no longer justify the steady number of continued Korean adoptions overseas, how, then, can the discussion surrounding this topic be contextualized as diasporic? In sum, the artwork and relations surrounding the art demonstrate that the current discussions inadequately address the lived history and experiences of Korean diaspora, and in particular those North Korean resident penetrants who straddle a divided peninsula. The opening or cross-pollination based upon discussions about diasporic art thus helps rejuvenate the ongoing and age-old identity question. Moreover, this special issue—with its articles, interview, reflections, artwork, and photos—provides answers and its own grounding as the state of the field grows.

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