ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN IDENTITIES

Beyond The Epiphon

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emphasize how theatrical performance by adoptees or about Korean adoption says much about the continuing significance of racial performance: how the body still remains the sticking point by which social distinctions and differences are generated and defined. Like other Asian American bodies, the body of the Korean adoptee is singled out for scrutiny through a set of distinctive racial signifiers. Unlike many Asian Americans, however, Koreans and other Asians adopted into non-Asian families and communities experience race primarily as an aspect of their individual difference, rather than as familial or cultural identity. Thus Korean adoption offers a particularly intense and distinctive perspective on the complex “racial etiquette” at play in the United States today: how, as Michael Omi and Howard Winant suggest, the “rules shaped by our perception of race in a comprehensively racial society determine the ‘presentation of self,’ distinctions of status, and appropriate modes of conduct” (62).

Getting to Know You

One of the legacies of the Korean War in the United States is the thousands of adopted children who have grown up, or are growing up, U.S. citizens. In a room at Dubuque’s Grand Opera House, cast members of the “King and I,” including many Korean-American children, relax. It’s a pleasant, almost joyful atmosphere. Several of them, including Martin, are adopted.

When the production concludes today, it should be one heck of a celebration, say Cheryl and Bob Werner. They have two children, Isaac, 11½, and Jasmine, 10, both adopted.

“What’s wonderful is this is a natural connection for the kids,” Cheryl Werner said. “They’re celebrating their heritage. It’s a chance for them to be together. Friendships are blossoming.”

The number of Asian faces lends authenticity to the story, which takes place in Thailand.

—Craig Reber, Dubuque Telegraph Herald

On July 29, 2000, an article in the Dubuque, Iowa Telegraph Herald emphasized one particular aspect of a production of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s The King and I: its casting of Korean adoptees, both children and adults. These cast members were given roles presumably in part because their “Asian faces,” according to reporter Craig Reber, lent “authenticity” to the drama. Participation in the musical, it was suggested by at least one parent, was also lauded as a way of encouraging a sense of cultural community, “a natural connection for the kids” who were presumably “celebrating their heritage” as well as performing Rodgers and Hammerstein onstage.

What does it mean that participation in such a patently fictitious work of musical theater should be taken as a “natural” community or authentic “heritage” for these particular cast members? What national, ethnic, and cultural “heritage” is evoked here?

In the most general sense, interpreting the famous Rodgers and Hammer-
stein's "Oriental" musical as offering an "authentic" performance of "heritage" suggests the degree to which certain racial stereotypes persist in American culture. Whether in the 1996 Broadway revival or in Dubuque, the casting of Asian Americans in many of these roles is, on some level, certainly an improvement over the yellowface performances of the past; yet it seems incongruous to think that such casting practices ensure the "authenticity" of both the production's representation and the racial/ethnic identity of cast members. Most disturbing, of course, are the implications that these characterizations, however exaggerated, do pass for reality and that, furthermore, Korean adoptees, in performing these stereotypes, both reproduce and internalize the presumed reality of these characterizations as a dimension of "their" heritage. It is a haunting question: to what extent are these children taught that their own "Asianness" can be performed only through stereotype, the exaggerated style of the racial masquerade? As perpetuated in such popular musicals as The King and I, such stereotypes remain familiar and powerful; produced in a relatively racially homogeneous venue, this seductively spectacular and toe-tapping presentation of the dancing inhabitants of the exotic court of Siam, with its customs both quaint and barbaric, seems even less likely to be countered by alternative views of what "Korean" or "Asian American" identity might be.

As Robert Lee has suggested, the history of Asian American exclusion and marginalization has long extended itself through a process of stereotyping the Asian body as either the exotic "foreign" or the abject "alien" (3). Recent writing by Korean adoptees often indicates a painful familiarity with these "Oriental" stereotypes.

Yet Korean adoptee experience is not wholly one of marginalization; as Bruining's poem suggests, Korean adoptees are also "chosen" for incorporation. For Asian Americans, exclusion has always existed in tandem with a measure of inclusion, whether as resulting from the economic demand for cheap labor and/or international capital or from the cultural fetishization of Orientalia. In the contemporary racial landscape of the United States, Asian Americans, in fact, can become the exemplars of American's ability to absorb "others" in its melting pot. This is inherent in the familiar stereotype of the "model minority," of Asian Americans as "a racial minority whose apparently successful ethnic assimilation was a result of stoic patience, political obedience, and self-improvement" (Robert Lee 145). As Lee and others have noted, the emergence of this stereotype in the latter half of the twentieth century bolstered the image of the United States as a tolerant and inclusive nation with an inherent moral superiority over its racist, fascist, and imperialist enemies of WWII. In the 1950s and after, the model minority stereotype could distinguish Asian Americans from other, less obliging minority groups such as African Americans: "The representation of Asian-American communities as self-contained, safe, and politically acquiescent became a powerful example of the success of the American creed in resolving the problems of race" (160).

The figure of the adoptee is inextricably linked with the contradictions of the "model minority": a figure at once indelibly marked as a racial "other" yet also celebrated as quintessentially "American." As Catherine Cheniza Choy and Gregory Paul Choy point out, the circumstances behind their being in the United States differs greatly from those emigrating as part of a labor force or as political refugees: "What distinguishes Korean adoptees from other Asian Americans . . . is not their labor in the U.S. economy, but rather their consumption by white adoptive families in the United States." Far from being perceived as "unwanted" immigrants, adoptees are brought into the "heart" of middle-class and upper-class American families throughout America.

Accordingly, their presence has been touted as proof of the success not only of American economic prosperity but also more recently of American multicultural values. The comments of adoptive parent Cheryl Werner are telling: while she suggests that adoptive children might be celebrating "their" heritage through performances of The King and I, she later emphasizes the transcendence of racial difference, concluding: "We talk about the differences and similarities in cultures. . . . We're all part of God's family. This was part of a different plan to bring us all together as one family. And it was definitely God's plan to bring us together" (Reber). Her evocation of "God's plan," imagining adoptive families as divinely ordained, might well be inspired by a particular religious faith. Importantly, it also resonates with a racial philosophy that has become much more a part of the mainstream secular political discourse in the contemporary United States. Later, another adoptive parent lauds the spectacle of The King and I as "a salad bowl . . . of all different colors and flavors that together lend beauty to America's culture" (Reber). These comments too lend themselves to a familiar imagining of contemporary America as triumphantly multicultural.

Stop crying.
stop feeling bad.
Those kids who call you "Chink"
And "Flat Face"
Don't know anything
besides, you probably provoked them.

They said
Feel lucky
You were "chosen"
Really meaning
I was also given up.

They said
They are offended,
You have everything, so be happy.
Be appreciative, and
Never let the tears show.

They said
You don't belong here.
Where do you come from?
Do you speak English?
Do you like America?
As if I just landed
From a distant galaxy. (Bruining)
Such statements are in keeping with the paradoxes informing how Korean adoptees are represented in American culture. While certain instances of stereotyping might mark Korean adoptees as racially marginal, other discursive practices employ them as central to much more liberal racial projects. Korean adoptees, raised as “all-American” by primarily white and relatively affluent families, might be thought of as exemplary proof of the moral superiority of postwar America. Their bodies could be used to demonstrate the racial tolerance of American society, countering the vociferous charges of racism made by other “colored” subjects. With widespread attention given by the media to the racial oppression of African Americans and to civil rights protests, the acceptance of Asian American children could demonstrate the true moral purity of a country and its people, who, at their heart, overlook race and take “foreign” children into their own bosom. The adoptee narrator of Marie G. Lee’s short story sarcastically notes this sentiment: “I can’t blame Mom and Dad for adopting me—they wanted a kid. And wouldn’t it be nice if Mr. and Mrs. Jaspers took a kid out of some poor Third World country? We’ll name her Sarah, which means 'God’s precious treasure,' they said” (205). Acts of adoption, and the successful demonstration of the adoptees’ full cultural assimilation, could put a noble face on both the economic inequalities between “First World” and “Third World” countries, and even be seen as penance for a history of American military involvement in Asia. The United States could in fact be seen as “rescuing” Korean and other Asian children just as it was rescuing their countries of origin from the evil influences of communism. Such children become not just the lucky accidents of history but in fact testimony to the benevolent assimilative power of American culture. Such visions of the past, of course, suppress a more complex, less altruistic history: the first Korean adoptees were in fact biracial Amerasian children of U.S. servicemen, and the economic hardship that prompted widespread adoption from Korea was in large part a result of the war.

Viewed in this light, as a Cold War fantasy that represents Asian characters as childlike and in need of both tutelage and rescue, The King and I becomes an even more vexed venue for adoptee performance. Bruce McConachie rightly reads the “Oriental” musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein as reflective of Cold War fears of the spread of communism in Asia and 1950s “imperialist economics”; such musicals influenced popular opinion, in convincing “American citizens to support U.S. policies in Southeast Asia in the 1960s” (71). Furthermore, he argues, not just the fictional representation but casting choices supported this understanding. In the original productions of works such as South Pacific (1949) and Flower Drum Song (1958) as well as The King and I (1951), casting the Asian characters in a somewhat “random” manner (with the children in The King and I played by “children of Oriental, Negro, and Puerto Rican extraction”) and the white characters with exclusively white actors created the sensation of “Asianess” as a performance in itself, a matter of external role-playing involving a darker shade of grease paint and other theatrical trappings, while with “Western characters, on the other hand, the audience could presume that the ‘inside’ matched the ‘outside.’” This casting promoted an emptying-out of “Asianess,” where “the lack of discernable casting conventions for Asian characters contributed to the audience’s belief that Asian people already were or could easily become just like us” (66). In particular, the casting of Asian children in this fashion accentuated the function they already served in the narratives (where, in The King and I, for instance, they are taught by Anna); “children, especially Asian children, are tabulae rasae on which may be written the dictates of the West” (67).

Given these terms, in the Dubuque revival of the play it might indeed be somewhat “natural” to have Korean adoptees—particularly those adopted too young to have any recollection of Korea—featured in these roles. If raised without the benefit of contact with Korean or Korean Americans, formal language training, or concerted guidance by adoptive parents and community, such children, one might argue, have as much knowledge of Korea or Asia as can be attained through mainstream U.S. culture. Not only, then, do the stereotypical representations of Rodgers and Hammerstein become, sadly enough, the most “authentic” Asian representation that these lowans can muster, but more importantly, their very participation in such a musical reinforces, paradoxically enough, their “American” status. If we are, as one might argue, still living with the legacy of a Cold War liberalism that figures Asian bodies as in need of white tutelage, then these characterizations represent not only the Asian country in need of military intervention, but also the assimilated Asian American whose model behavior as “American” might indeed demonstrate that “Asianess” is easily vacated and that racial differences are only empty masks.

This example from The King and I illustrates the prevalence of two kinds of racial performances that to some degree run counter to one another: first, the racial stereotyping of all Asian faces as unassimilable others, an explicit reminder of anti-Asian sentiment past and present; and second, a liberal embrace of those who are racially different into the heart of the American family. These racial performances, put into play by a long and inescapable history, define the boundaries of Korean adoptee representation in seemingly inevitable ways. Yet, as David Palumbo-Liu has suggested, Asian American bodies have not only been “conceptual entities with which (and against which) America measured itself” but also “active agents,” who “have historically participated in the constitution of what ‘America’ was and is at any given moment.” (Asian/American 2). Recent works by Asian American theater companies, such as the Twin Cities company Theater Mu in their 1991 and 1998 performances Mask Dance and The Walleye Kid, also articulate these racial ideologies, suggesting that we explore more closely both the persistence of anti-Asian sentiment and the presumably more liberal society into which Korean adoptees are welcomed. At the same time they offer alternative examples by which we might see not only the social tensions and desires inscribing the body of the adoptee, but also the possibilities of resisting such readings.
Racial Inscription, Racial Erasure

Well, I actually am Korean at least I was... way back... before I was, you know... "adopted." Yeah... there's ten thousand of us Korean adoptees out there in the backwoods of Minnesota... about one for every lake...—P.K. in Mask Dance

I like my adoptive parents, though I called them Mom and Dad, but I'm sorry, that's the best I could do for them. The best they could do for me was to live in an Edina neighborhood with only white people and their children, who would later go to school with me and call me things like "chink" and "gook" and not include me in their games, their parties, their groups, their proms. Could anybody really blame me when I started staying in my room a lot, wearing black, getting my nose pierced at a head shop on Hennepin Avenue just because the spirit moved me?


*Mask Dance*, which premiered in 1993, began as a collaboration between R. A. Shionni (the current artistic director), Dong-il Lee (a professor of traditional Korean dance, who developed much of the choreography for the show) and Joo Yeo No. The work became Theater Mu’s first production and was revived in 1995. The story was developed in conjunction with a writing workshop for Korean adoptees, whose personal narratives were incorporated into the show. Several seasons later, in 1998, Theater Mu presented another work also centered on Korean adoption,*The Walleye Kid*, written by R. A. Shionni and Sundraya Kase. Both plays are concerned with Korean adoptee characters adopted by white parents into racially homogeneous communities in Minnesota.

That Theater Mu began with and has continued to develop plays about Korean adoptees—a subject unusual even for Asian American theater companies—says much about the demographics of Asian America in the Midwest, and its relatively sizable Korean adoptee population. Minnesotans have adopted approximately 10,000 children from Korea, the highest number of such adoption in any state except California (and a considerable number considering the population of Minnesota—roughly 4 million in comparison to California’s 33 million). Such a phenomenon might be attributed to the long history of adoptions within the state as well as to the work of particular agencies, such as the Children’s Home Society of Minnesota, that facilitate international adoptions.

*Mask Dance* presents the different perspectives of three teenaged Korean adoptees, Karen, Carl, and Lisa, who were adopted by white parents. Karen, the oldest, is leaving home for college, and this change precipitates numerous family eruptions: a visit from her brother Carl, who has become estranged from the family, and an emotional crisis for youngest sister Lisa, who sees Karen’s departure as abandonment. In contrast to the realistic family drama of *Mask Dance*, *The Walleye Kid* has a more comic and fantastical touch, basing itself on the Japanese folktale of Momotaro, the boy discovered in a giant peach. The play begins when a rural Minnesota couple, George and Mary, go ice fishing and discover a Korean baby inside an enormous fish. They adopt the baby, whom they later name Annie.

Both works stage how these Korean adoptee characters encounter racism in the form of familiar stereotypes. In *Mask Dance*, Lisa recalls a traumatic childhood moment in which she is attacked by other children, who call her names and cover her with sand; in *The Walleye Kid*, Annie is likewise taunted by a playmate who calls her a "sneaky chink." Carl’s friend, another Korean adoptee named P.K., alludes to such familiar incidents in her performance art; her monologue recalls one particular instance at one of her parents’ parties:

I never really like those parties... so I used to hide out, in the closet... with my pair of six guns...
(pause)
I never liked them... ‘cause my Mom would take me out and show me off, you know? Like it was kind of... show and tell... and I was the show... And all those strange smelling people would smile and stare down at me... like I was some kind of freak...
(pause)
There was this one big fat woman... breathing down on me... and she asked my Mom if I had had my shots... like I was some kind of little animal.
(pause)
I pulled out my six gun... real slow... raised it up... and took aim at her... right between the eyes... She laughed... and thought it was cute... me playing cowboys and Indians... Then I pulled the trigger and bang... She was dead...
(pause)
Everybody thought it was funny...
(pause)
But for me, it was real. (358-59)

Yet the plays’ emphasis is not solely on these overtly racist occurrences. More prevalent is a less explicit and thus more insidious form of racial marking that goes hand in hand with a presumably more inclusive climate. When Mary takes her newly adopted Annie out for a walk, they have a casual encounter with a man that illustrates a much more complex way in which Annie’s racial difference is registered and understood.

(Man gets up to look at Annie. He looks surprised.)
Man. Cute little girl, isn’t she?
Mary. Thank you...
Man. She look like her father?
Mary. Well, no... actually—
Man. You adopt her from China?
Mary. We think she’s from Korea... but she’s all ours now...
Man. Yeah, sad how those people can’t take care of their own... You’re doing a good thing...
Mary. You don’t understand, she’s our blessing...
Man. What’s her name?
Elements of the man's "helpful" intentions, as Mary points out, still bear the traces of the familiar old racism: the inability to see the distinctiveness of ethnicity and national origins, the typecasting of the Asian body as alien, and the interpretation of adoption as an act of charity for an entire nation of "people" who "can't take care of their own." But what will make it especially "hard" for Annie, the play makes clear, is that such comments are compatible with what the man believes are good intentions and a prevailing spirit of tolerance and acceptance.

Both plays point to the contradictions developed within these kinds of "helpful" intentions. In post-civil rights America, race very much continues to matter as a physiological designator, one that is immediately visible and spectacular in its effects. At the same time, the white adults depicted in the plays are not racist in the old sense; rather, their acts are in keeping with a more liberal attempt to minimize racial differences: "From the liberal perspective, particular differences between individuals have no bearing on their moral value, and by extension should make no difference concerning the political or legal status of individuals" (Goldberg 5). Thus the Korean adoptees are addressed in ways that de-emphasize racial differences in favor of more "universal" qualities of self-hood; while their racial difference might be perceived, its import should be minimized. The well-intentioned stranger, for instance, thinks himself kind in pointing out that Annie's difficult "otherness" would be magnified by giving her a "foreign" name.

It is not just the helpful stranger who initiates this action, but in fact a larger ideology embraced and used by a number of characters in the two plays. The Wait ye Kai shows that at the very moment of adoption, Mary and George's recognition of Annie's racial difference goes hand in hand with its suppression.

Mary. She's our own little miracle... she's ours...
George. (pause) Ours?
Mary. Yes. Just believe in this George... please...
George. Well... maybe you're right... Mary. Don't you love her dark hair and her tan skin? George. Yah, it's nice... but she doesn't look like she's from around here...
Mary. Does that matter to you?
George. No, no... it's fine with me...
Mary. And her eyes, look at her beautiful eyes...

George. Yah... uh... they sure are... (pause) now... can I hold her for a while?
Mary. Of course...
(Mary gives the baby to George.)
George. Gosh, she's so light...
Mary. She's our baby now, right?
George. Right, Mary...
Mary. We'd better put her to bed...
(Mary and George exit with baby.) (9-10)

Similarly, in Mask Dance the mother is pressed by her daughter Karen to say why she adopted from Korea. Karen's questions specifically identify a curiosity about the racial, economic, and national differences governing the process of her adoption: "didn't you want some American kids?" "some people say it's because Koreans were the easiest to adopt" (367). Her mother answers these questions only by describing the "strange" experience that presumably led to her decision to adopt:

I was on an airline flight... visiting my mother... [a]nd I began to hear these voices... of all the unborn babies inside me, singing out to me... All of my babies... singing sweet songs of sorrow... [a] and crying out to me... Mommy I need you... Hold me... rock me...
(pause)
They had died a strange death... [m]y babies... They died before they were born... [b]efore they were conceived...
(pause)
Most people ask, Does life begin at conception? No one asks when death begins... But death can begin before conception. My babies died with no one to mourn them. No one except me... But they'll always live within me... They'll always sing to me...
(pause)
Then I looked at the child in the seat next to mine... She was traveling alone... [a]nd when she looked up at me... I thought she looked just like me... when I was her age... And in my rage... I thought... this child could be mine... This child could be mine...
(pause)
Then the voices of my babies... cried out to me, Mommy give us peace... Please... leave your grief... We are happy where we are... deep and unborn within your soul...
(pause)
I guess that's when I knew... that I needed to find you.
(Karen walks over to her mother and they embrace.) (368)

Notably, the emphasis on the heard but unseen "voices" of the "unborn," despite the current resonance of the phrase with anti-abortion rhetoric, does not act only as a reference to the mother's specific religious beliefs (which are never alluded to again in the play). Rather her deeply interior monologue is given weight...
as it supports the broader precepts of liberal humanism, describing the mother as moving away from thinking of the maternal relationship solely in terms of children who might look "just like me" and towards a racially transcendent state of maternal feeling. Significantly, it steers the topic of conversation with her daughter away from any discussion of social differences among children. In this, the mother's monologue parallels a later monologue by the father, who until this point is notable only for his insensitivity toward his family. When he does talk about their adoption, it is in terms that both acknowledge his awareness of the racial and cultural differences that complicate his relationship with them ("this Korean stuff") and at the same time dismiss these concerns.

I don't know all about this Korean stuff... and what's good for them... I just tried to give them a roof over their head and somebody to love them... and maybe I didn't even do a decent job of that. (pause)
But let me tell you... when they told us Lisa had a brother and sister who had to come along with her... I could've caused a fuss and said, "You can't pull that trick on me"... but I didn't... and when I saw those three little kids at the airport gate... three of them instead of one... I thanked God he blessed us with more than we expected... only what do I get for all that? My kids and wife can't get out of here fast enough. (380)

Like the mother, the father also registers the awareness that his children are racially different and then responds through constructing himself as a parent whose capacity for nurture is not limited by these terms. Both monologues contain a measure of reassurance that parental love can in effect move "beyond" race, that fatherly support and maternal feeling are not circumscribed by racial, national, and economic boundaries. At the same time, they leave unclear how the Korean adoptee characters are to deal with those racial markings that figure so prominently in how they are seen, both by others and themselves.

To be sure, the well-intentioned characters do try to cope with the racial distinctiveness of Korean adoptees, but through presenting it as a cultural choice rather than a material reality. The mother in Mask Dance exposes her children to Korean culture and food, in a calculated if somewhat hesitant effort to create pride in their difference: "I just wanted you to know about your own... heritage" (366). The Walleye Kid describes Mary's similar efforts for Annie's kindergarten "culture day." Yet the adoptee characters find these efforts insufficient.

Mary. How was culture day in your class, honey?
Annie. Good.
Mary. Did everyone like your hanbok?
Annie. Yes, they all wanted one.
Mary. That's wonderful...
Annie. And I sang that song we learned at summer camp...
Mary. Sounds like you had a great time...
Annie. I did... but... how come nobody at school looks like me? (12)

In the plays, even the best-intentioned efforts at cultural education do little to prevent the Korean adoptees' racial isolation. Most painfully, the subject of race becomes a primary source of alienation of child from parent. The adoptive parents are unable to adequately address their children's concerns about their own differences, in part because they lack both the vocabulary for any discussion of race and a way of understanding the strength with which it will figure in their children's lives. Adoptive parents in both plays are rendered helpless when their love cannot protect their children from being "seen" a particular way by others. When Annie is confronted with the taunts of her playmate in The Walleye Kid, her father can respond only by calling the offending child "ignorant" and telling her that "we should talk to the teachers... and his parents... so that this won't happen again... It's like we're trying to help him" (16). Such a response addresses racism only as a regrettable but singular instance of prejudice that can be cured through educating ignorant individuals. After Karen leaves for college, Lisa grows even more anxious; her mother hopes that being without her adoptive siblings will be "good for her," even while Karen argues differently: "It's not easy, being the only Korean in that town" (372). Only when Lisa finally attempts suicide do her parents understand the magnitude of her grief.

The plays, then, present how more liberal values, or even multicultural celebrations of "diversity," can both simultaneously recognize racial difference and deny its real effects. Such attitudes harbor a paradox: racial difference indeed can easily be overlooked in favor of more universal, transcendent qualities; then the most visible racial markers—facial features, hair—become merely a racial mask over a deracinated "self." At the same time, as the Korean adoptees are themselves aware, this is a mask that cannot be taken off; the material reality of the body and its featured differences cannot be argued, ordered, or wished away. Nor, unfortunately, can the legacies of earlier racisms be so easily expunged from contemporary America.

They said
Smiles for the camera
Open your eyes, they are squinting
But my eyes weren't squinting. (Bruising)

In Mask Dance, Carl strongly resists his mother's efforts to teach him "his" culture, insisting that "I'm not really Korean" (362).

(Karen opens the trunk and pulls out a traditional Korean gown.)
Karen. Wow... I didn't know this was in here!
Carl. Mom probably stashed it in there... I hate all that Korean stuff she tries to shove down our throats...
Karen. She's never done that...
Carl. Didn't she start up that dumb Kamp Bulgogi, just so we'd meet other Korean kids?
Lisa. I didn't mind it...
Carl. That place had more losers than mosquitoes!
Karen. We should know more about Korean things.
Carl. Go ahead... just don’t start pushing that junk on me. (363-64)

Such expressions register not so much a desire to assimilate as a suspicion about the terms of even a “multicultural” legitimation of difference. As the writing of Korean adoptee Karl Ruth suggests, there is little difference between calling Korean adoptees to be more than icons of American racial tolerance.

I have heard parents commenting that adopting Korean children is an enriching cultural experience and that other adults do the same.

Those parents must not understand that the price they paid for us was insignificant compared to the price we pay to fit into their world.

Society has already told you and me that we have become Americans because of someone else’s charity. Now we’re being told that our cultural displacement had a purpose—multiculturalism. By growing up in white families, we can be examples. . . . We can show others that racial harmony is possible. We just can’t show our burdened backs.

We albow our parents’ fears by internalizing our own.
I guess someone forgot to ask us if we wanted to be America’s diversity mascots. (Dear Lenox,” p. 144)

Importantly, however, each of the Korean adoptee characters does find a way of coming to terms with their own performances of racial difference, most notably through a self-initiated exploration of their bodies as “Korean.” These connections are expressed primarily through nonverbal modes such as music, dance, masks, and dream sequences. Both Mask Dance and The Walleye Kid employ nonrealistic elements for this purpose; the former incorporates the figures of a “Spirit” (who represents the “emotional life of the sisters”) and “Mask Dancer” (who represents the “spirit of Korean culture”), and the latter a Chwidei Dancer and a Shaman Dancer. Through their interaction with these otherworldly characters, adoptees externalize fantasies of ethnic connection. Thus when Karen is lost in her fantasy of being a forgotten Korean princess, she is suddenly possessed by the Spirit Dancer; similarly, Carl later tries on the Chwidei mask and is led by the Mask Dancer and the Spirit through a series of traditional Korean dance moves.

This kind of staging tends to posit these ethnic affiliations as powerfully imagined rather than realized in life experience. While both plays adoptees travel to Korea to search for birth parents, they do not uncover a firm sense of their past or origins; in fact, as suggested by P.K., such voyages often reveal only a lack of concrete information:

When I went back... I had my real name and birth date... on the papers my folks had... so I figured, I could find my birth parents... I went all the way back to the orphanage... got them to open up their record books... and the woman showed me this sheet of names... of all the babies registered that week... there were a dozen of us... and so they gave us all the same birth dates... and the same last name. (362)

The Walleye Kid’s Annie also fails to find her birth mother; instead, her body is literally wrapped up in “a seemingly endless” paper list of adoptee names. Such ambiguities can lead to highly romanticized fantasies of Korean origins. Until the end of Mask Dance, Karen clings to her hopes that she is a “lost princess.” The Walleye Kid resolves Annie’s quest to understand the terms of her adoption only through her being told an elaborate fairy tale: a story of the warring “East Kingdom” and “West Kingdom” whose prince and princess became involved in a secret love affair, and had a baby daughter who was orphaned at their death. This final story, with its oblique references to an actual history of civil war, destruction, and poverty in Korea, is as close as Annie comes to understanding her own story. Importantly, the plays do not stage the Korean adoptee characters in moments of reconciliation with their birth parents or other Korean characters; any presentation of what might be construed as a “transnational” space is tentative at best. Rather, their endings rely more on tableaux of reconciliation with the adoptive parents and a reuniting of an “American” heterosexual nuclear family with the bodies of Korean adoptees at their core.

Yet these performances of racial and ethnic affinities, expressed through mask and dance, remain profound and cathartic, especially when contrasted with either racist stereotyping or the liberal humanist erasure of racial meaning. These unsolicited possessions by masked dancers refuse the assumption that racial and ethnic identity is simply a false mask over a pure and deracinated “American” self. Rather, they insist that such identities are an integral aspect of both body and self. “Asianness” or “Koreanness” is not so easily vacated, and racial masks are by no means “empty”; rather, to use the words of Mask Dance, “Masks are... extensions of our bodies... that connect us to nature” (372). In The Walleye Kid, a Korean shaman tells Annie: “All Koreans have a Han. It is our ancestral river that flows through us and gives us great joy or great sorrow” (22).

Such inscriptions of ethnic affinities are not simply reassertions of old essentialisms; rather, they point the way toward alternative racial and ethnic identifications that are part of an inherently racialized American being.

[A new historical construct is never entirely new and the old is never entirely supplanted by the new. Rather the new is grafted onto the old. Thus racism, too, is never entirely new. Shards and fragments of its past incarnations are embedded in the new. Or, if we switch metaphors to an archeological image, the new is sedimented onto the old, which occasionally seeps or bursts through.” (Holt 20)

As historian Thomas Holt suggests, old and new performances of race do not effectively replace one another. I have tried to suggest how these different theatrical and cultural productions might reveal this complex layering of American racial ideologies at play at this contemporary moment. These plays debunk stereotypes and challenge easy liberal humanist views or celebrations of the multicultural nation. But Theater Mu’s Korean adoptee characters do not only address the many ways in which they serve as the subjects of racial fantasy for others; they actively pursue ways of resignifying their own bodies. Their exploration of traditional Korean masking and dancing speaks not to the hope that

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they might be considered "authentically Korean" so much as to a distinctive new identity.

Most significantly, some of these moments directly address the racial isolation of adoptees within the United States, suggesting that Korean adoptees might come together and recognize a common ground. In Mask Dance, P.K. presents a dramatic monologue at the "Club Indigo Performance Slam" that at first plays off an expectation that her audience will be surprised by her name "Annie Oakley"; she confronts them: "You don't believe me? You think because I know how to dance with this mask on that I'm Oriental? Ann Hyundai . . . or Annie B. Toyotas? . . . How about Anna Luisa Filipina? You want to see my birth certificate?" (358). But P.K., in identifying herself as a Korean adoptee, also signals the possible presence of an alternative audience, a multitude of those who, like her, regularly face others' disbelief in the congruence of their names and bodies: "[There's] ten thousand of us Korean adoptees out there in the backwoods of Minnesota . . . about one for every lake" (358). The subsequent effect of P.K.'s monologue on Carl reinforces the suggestion that theater can create and validate as well as model new ethnic and racial communities. Although her need for reinventing her performance comes out of her marginalization by the oppressive gaze of white America—"being in the living room . . . feeling like this spotlight has me trapped on stage, I want to hide . . . but I can't get out of the light" (370)—what she ultimately makes of it is transformative for the Korean adoptees who watch her and come to some recognition of their own complex emotional situation.

Now I love it . . . the spotlight . . . It's almost like I need it . . . You hear those people out there clapping . . . and it feels good . . . 'cause you just opened your veins, and showed them your blood . . . and they love you. (370)

In moments such as these, Theatric Mu's work draws attention to the ability of Korean adoptees to express the complex nature of how cultural identity, ethnic affinity, and racial difference are performed in the United States today. Theatric Mu's plays show a side of Korean adoptee experience that goes far beyond the roles that such faces and bodies normally are allowed to play. In generating new modes of performing as well as new opportunities to witness these performances, such works provide starting points for a much fuller understanding of how memory, history, and experience are enacted upon the bodies and psyches of children, parents, and their respective nations.

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6 "A Task of Reclamation": Subjectivity, Self-Representation, and Textual Formulation in Sara Suleri's Meatless Days

Rocio G. Davis

Life writing has long been one of the most emblematic forms of American art, transforming the interactions of self and society into literary performance that nuance responses to questions on selfhood and affiliation. For immigrants arriving in the quest for the American dream, the impulse toward self-inscription recapitulates what Paul John Eakin considers "the fundamental rhythms of identity formation" as "the writing of autobiography emerges as a second acquisition of language, a second coming into being of self, a self-conscious self-consciousness," becoming a "theater of self-expression, self-knowledge, and self-recovery" (18, 3). Ethnographic American autobiographies have repeatedly challenged the generic scripts ostensibly required by American autobiography. These revisionary texts center on individual formation of ethnicity and its representation and how each group occupies certain areas, negotiates historical specificities, and forms communities. Importantly, these texts also challenge the boundaries of traditional autobiography by blending diverse formal techniques with the increasingly complex questions of subjectivity, self-representation, and the process of signification. Further, Sidonie Smilth suggests that autobiographical practices can be taken up as occasions to "critique dominant discourses of identity and truth-telling by rendering the 'I' unstable, shifting, provisional, troubled by and in its identifications" ("Memory" 40). A reexamination of the past through experiences with location, language, identities, and change, as well as an engagement with hybrid narrative practices, constitutes a central strategy in Sara Suleri's memoir, Meatless Days.

In general, autobiography centers on development and change in the subject's life, narrating the events, choices, and transformations constitutive to the self's evolution. Carolyn Barros argues that "change" is the "operative metaphor in autobiographical discourse," presented as "transformative, a significant mutation in the characteristic qualities and societal relationships of the principal persona. Autobiography offers these various metamorphoses emplotted,
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