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Re-Visioning into Third Space: Autobiographies on Losing Home-and-Homeland

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Truth cannot penetrate a closed mind. If all places in the universe are in the Aleph, then all stars, all lamps, all sources of light are in it, too.

How, then, can I translate into words the limitless Aleph, which my floundering mind can scarcely encompass? Really what I want to do is impossible, for any listing of an endless series is doomed to be infinitesimal. In that single gigantic instant I saw millions of acts both delightful and awful; not one of them amazed me more than the fact that all of them occupied the same point in space, without overlapping or transparency.

The Aleph by Jorge Luis Borges (1945)

"Where did you learn English? You speak so well!"

He said to me in blank astonishment, rationalizing the mismatch between my Asian face and my seamless American accent. A piece of me dies every time I am forced to explain where I learned English. This has not been once, but so many times. Is my face that deceitful, elusive, exotic, betraying? I apologize for almond eyes that hide prickly pear childhoods in the Arizona desert, and say, I'm sorry when my English words become distorted by cheek bones too high and a nose with no bridges. Does the flatness of my hair play cover up as I reconcile the idea, do I really want to be like you? As my mind and spirit grow tired from these exhausting thoughts, I decide this time to reply without an explanation,

He said to me with a big smile, matching my Asian face and my slight Korean accent. I used to love these comments, but not any more. This praise or "surprised" comment used to be a reward for my endless efforts to learn English, but not any more. Where did I learn English? Yes, I learned English in Korea since I was 12 years old as a foreign language. I realize that my studious efforts to reduce my Korean accent and to be "assimilated" as a native speaker have once again failed. However, seeing my Asian face, his low language expectation agitates him to accolade my English fluency. After hesitating to talk back or not, I decided to simply say,

"Thank you. I've been practicing."

As one Asian and one Asian American both currently living in New York City, we explore the possibilities of transnational experience as a space of the real-and-imagined, as a potential Thirdspace.¹ Moving away from humanist assumptions of dueling dualities in the formation of identity, we seek a place that collapses social and temporal borders and transgresses geographical and physical sites. For us, challenging the essentialisms that confine our sense of Asian-ness in America requires that we acknowledge the material and social present, while conceiving of a Thirdspace where all such qualities are inseparable, interdependent, simultaneous, and holistic. We use autobiographies and follow post-modern geographer Edward Soja (1989), among others, in understanding the criticalness of spatiality in the 'making of history' and attempt to share how geographical displacement, inextricable to the real-and-imagined, play into our sense of identity. To this end, we cautiously take up the subject of home-and-homeland, careful not to fall into what Soja (1996) calls "the narrowed and aggressive centrism and essentialisms" or "hostile and competing battlegrounds" (p. 13) of rigid definition and binary functions. Moving away from definitive confines, we consider the lead of scholars such as Homi Bhabha (1994), Soja (1996), Henri Lefebvre (1991), and Hongyu Wang (2004), and pry open a space of possibility where experience is then caught between and amongst multiple worlds and visions, where is it riddled with contradiction, coincidence, forgiveness, and rejection.

The Autobiographical Study of Self

In this paper, we engage Janet Miller's (2006) work in autobiography as both a genre of research and a mode of inquiry. For Miller (2006), autobiographical study is a form of curriculum theorizing, educational inquiry, and textual pedagogical practice. It is self-reflexive, analytical, moving, and critical. As a method of research, Miller (2005) describes autobiography as not merely the sharing of story, but as a way of analyzing lived experiences in the social, cultural, political, and economic milieu of space and time. We cannot deny the historical imprint of racial categories and stereotypical labels upon our sense of self. Instead, we draw from them, push against them, and attempt to collapse them in order to give rise to an alternative explanation. We understand American and Korean social mores and norms shape much of our Asian identities, yet Thirdspace allows us to transcend any fixity, to remain ajar for incompleteness and complication. About this, Miller (2005) says:

By working autobiographically in ways that do not reify or glorify a unitary, linear, and always fully conscious of 'self,' or a concept of language as fully transparent...educators also can help students challenge humanist notions of 'experience' as well as the reified meanings we often make of 'what's really happened' in our educational lives. (p. 231)

Heeding Miller's call, we turn to our own narratives, once held captive within the category of Asian or Asian American. For us, living in America does not imply "becoming American," nor does it signify a bi-cultural identity or the co-existence of two parallel cultures (Wang, 2006). For us, identity is not a clear negotiation between dual spaces, or an assimilation of one into another. When tracing our transnational journeys, we find ourselves in constant struggle with the notion of identity as comfortable, safe, achieved, and unchanging. As we attempt to examine home-and-homeland, as shaped by geographical displacement, we resist the simple binary construction of this, as well as the binary concepts of English/non-English, native/immigrant, and first generation/second generation². It is within these labels we find ourselves silenced, for their reduction of experience conceals an evolving struggle to understand self, our desperation for origin, and our imminent loss and uncertainty.

Spatiality in Context

In this reconceptualization of space and human spatiality, then—the physical, the mental, the social, and the perceived, the conceived, and lived—exist simultaneously as a real-and-imagined Thirdspace. As said by French sociologist Henry Lefebvre (1991), we seek a "departing from the tight constraints of either/or to explore, as a consciously political strategy, the combinatorial openness of the both/and also..." (p. 31). Home-and-homeland—hyphenated here to symbolize its interconnectedness—does not refer exclusively to the physical place of a home or the country of origin, but includes the desires, dreams, and memories of that space, with the hopes, needs, and wants associated in the imaginings of a home-and-homeland (Bachelard, 1969). It is one of spatial imagination with both a material concreteness and a mystical awareness. Moreover, these envisionings do not necessarily begin with a new geographical location, but rather take root in the idealization of what physical displacement may entail.

As Homi Bhabha (1994) articulates, a Thirdspace "ensures that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity" (p. 55). In this Thirdspace, there are no simple negotiations, for what is there to negotiate? As said by Yen Le Espiritu (2003), we "do not merely insert or

incorporate ourselves into the existing spaces of the United States; but also transform these spaces and create new ones" (p. 10), such that in Thirdspace, contradictions are acknowledged, accepted, and embraced; they are put into movement to enable new layers of the self to emerge (Bhabha, 1994). This Thirdspace, which is not even a space at all, is a space of not one or the other. It is not the two opposing terms that are of particular interest here, but rather the simultaneous envisaging of this dialectical pairing and the subsequent birth of something new. It is not outside or inside, but both/and also. This is the deconstruction of the binary through the introduction of another; it is the creative reintroduction of the space between the center and the periphery that gives rise to the third Other (Lefebvre, 1991). About this, Soja (1996) writes:

Everything comes together in Thirdspace: subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined, the knowable and the unimaginable, the repetitive and the differential, structure and agency, mind and body, consciousness and the unconscious, the disciplined and the transdisciplinary, everyday life and unending history. Anything that fragments Thirdspace into separate specialized knowledges or exclusive domains destroys its meaning and openness. (pp. 56–57)

And so, not a simple mixture or additive, Thirdspace signifies "a form of disordering, deconstruction, and tentative reconstitution...producing an alternative that is both similar and strikingly different" (Soja, 1996, p. 61). It is the relationship between the conceived and the lived that later becomes reconceptualized into Thirdspace. And yet, there is always another dimension to our experiences, and another, and an-Other. *Il y toujours l'Autre*; There is always an-Other. As binary logic fails us, we realize our lived experiences cannot be treated as simple choices between two competing cultural grounds, Korea and America; rather, they are born from shifting moments, partialities, and slippages—the essential unknowns of reclaiming oneself in the midst of conflicting circumstance.

Locating Thirdspace in Everyday Life

If Thirdspace extends beyond the human capacity of articulation and conception, then how can an examination of life, identity, social critique, struggle, and liberation occur in a Thirdspace? For Soja (1996), an analysis of social relations, control over knowledge and power, and cultural practices is most vividly seen in a critique of everyday life, and to this, he states, "Everyday life is presented and represented as the place where alienation and

mystification are played out, enacted, concretely inscribed. It is also the place where the struggles to demystify human consciousness must be located" (p. 41). Therefore, the everyday is a setting that incurs a dynamic process of disrupting the ordinary, familiarizing the unfamiliar, and enlivening the mundane. The aim here is not to establish identity through an examination of everyday life, but rather to 'put into crisis' life moments that are forced to reckon with dominant understandings (de Certeau, 1984). Everyday life, although seemingly innocuous, inhabits material, ideological, and culturally lived spaces that tell an evolving story of self-understanding; they are infused, transformed, reciprocated, sparked, passed, remembered, juxtaposed, spoken, unheard. They are snippets not isolated in the world; they hold hands with national and cultural histories which are all mutually provoked. Even when the national story may be one of illusions and falsehoods, of coercion and malpractice, the nation in which we live does "structure the politics of our collective identification and imagined affiliations" (Pinar, 2004, p. 38). The particular and the universal are thus forever bound.

To Sir, with Visions

Thus, by approaching the house images with care not to break up the solidarity of memory and imagination, we may hope to make others feel all the psychological elasticity of an image that moves us at an unimaginable depth.

(Bachelard, 1969, p. 6)

As two Asians in America with a shared Korean ancestry, our stories are widely divergent, yet strangely overlapping. His³ begins in Korea with Hollywood illusions of an American dream; hers from the dry deserts of Arizona, far removed and once desperately nostalgic for a Korean homeland. He left the comforts of his Korean home to begin studies in the States, while, she unsettled as the American foreigner, traveled to Korea in search for origin. While he soon came to realize the xenophobic and racial conflicts of the United States, she, damaged by so, found the Korean culture elusive and un-accepting of her as an American. And somehow, these tumultuous journeys, birthed in vastly different places, run alongside each other in their struggle to understand race, home, identity, and self. As both are narratives of loss and re-creation, we release pieces of our past American and Korean visions, and yield to the subjective experience of displacement, as ongoingly and in movement. By sharing this transnational tale, we ask: *what have we lost, what may be created?* in the enduring process of understanding self in context, without context, and through Thirdspace.

In the beginning of this autobiography, we envision ourselves in relation to the rhetoric of allegiance, a patriotism that did not always apply to us, but pulled us relentlessly throughout our search for home-and-homeland.

I can conjure up the image readily. One Monday morning, like every Monday morning in the school play yard, it waved at me fiercely, violently whipping in the wind, flapping its stars and stripes, folding every which way, the red rows and whites lights a flurry of madness. I remember squinting up at it, not to see it more clearly but to bore holes through its old tattered fabric, and my heart beat madly, because today I refused to pay allegiance. My arms were stiffly pinned to my sides, and I shifted my glare to everyone around me who unquestioningly touched their hearts and spoke so simply of God and the republic. "Invisible, with liberty and justice for all," they all said in perfect unison. But, something was different in me that day, it was the beginning of something new, the day I refused to pledge.

Maybe it's because my mother still jokes that ever since I was a child, I always did the opposite of what I was told.

I was probably about nine years old, when my teacher gave me that lecture: it's a national duty to recite our allegiance, a symbol of our freedom and liberty, a story of how poor immigrants crossed treacherous oceans to arrive at a land of opportunity and build two car garage homes on cul-de-sacs paved with gold. I was in detention every Monday since that day. I admit, I was stubborn and the days when I was the only one were heart-thumpingly difficult to bear.

Why do I always bring trouble upon myself, my father would ask.

But close your eyes and picture it. What is America? America is Whiteness, Ford pick-up trucks, football games, blonde highlights, cheerleader uniforms, and rah-rah-rah's for football quarterbacks on fresh cut Astro-turf. Hollow cans of Bud light and barbeque stains on white T-shirts, celebrity gossip, Jerry Springer, and red-neck pride. Dig deeper! America is money-laundering, corporate playlands, McDonalds and low wages, anti-union policies, and plenty of military ammo. It's global takeover, justified exploitation, oil fields, and individual profit, profit, profit, with more, more, more, over-consumption and obesity, at size 16, 24, 36... Maybe it's because I wanted to be just like them.

As French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard (1969) alludes to, it is not so much the material construction of a house, or home, but the memories and imaginations about this home that draws us closer to our sense of self. For

her, the manufacturing of a prototypical American did not produce Korean dolls with immigrant upbringings. As she was positioned outside the definitive 'truths' of American character, she never remembered her parents drinking Bud Light and surely there were no barbeque stains on her Dad's undershirts. Her parents drove a 1982 discontinued Toyota Starlet with great pride in its lenient gas mileage. As powerfully written by Peter McLaren (2004):

We enact or 'enflesh' conventions or public transcripts...that, while they are truly fictions (and fictionally true), truth-effects, and the machinations of human interest, nevertheless fold into our subjectivities where they are conceived in the bridal chamber of commonsense. (p. xvi)

McLaren's words speak to the appropriation and circulation of 'truths' in the production of knowledge and power around specific discourses; in this work, the American discourse. Schools—as instruments of cultural erasure and American assimilation—have a long enduring past (Tyack, 1974). For many generations of immigrants, Eastern Europeans, Latinos, Asians, and for many involuntary and voluntary settlers, Blacks and Africans, schools powerfully communicate hidden messages that promulgate Whiteness, standard English, social norms, acceptability, and marginalization. It may be quite simple to see that in the shaping of a patriotic American, a non-White female with kimbop in her lunchbox and Korean-speaking parents would inevitably struggle at aligning herself to the cultural norms within which she was born and raised. It could also be that she was a rebellious child, flight prone, and fearful of organized religion. Nevertheless, when asked to recollect childhood memories that reflected her lived spaces, she chose one which illustrates her resistance to the 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977) that permit commonsense to infiltrate and bear seeds of 'truth' around the imagined vision of America. From the very beginning, she felt displaced in her own homeland; from the very beginning, she did not know any other way to live with this home.

I was too Americanized. Living in South Korea, I enjoyed American brands of food, clothes, movies, and music. McDonalds, Superman, GAP, and Michael Jackson were a few of the American constants my everyday life. Also, through my extensive exposure to Hollywood movies, music, and AFKN (Armed Forces Korea Network) channel, visions of the Stars and Stripes and the American National Anthem were certainly not foreign to me. "The land of the free~~~" When I hear and think about the Star Spangled Banner, my brain is stuck on this phrase, 'The land of the free!' Indeed, America is the land of freedom, opportu-

nity, and democracy. These are the main reasons that one of my distant relatives moved to California and ran a laundry shop in the 1980s. The land of the free! That is also the main reason that I migrated more than 6800 miles from Korea—my longing for freedom of thought, action, and life style. I dreamt of migrating to this free country. At a young age, I was jealous of my middle school friend who immigrated to the States. I could imagine his American life by watching Hollywood movies and TV shows. I thought he would not go through all the competition that I would struggle with entering a prestigious college in Korea. Imagine most academic high school students, including me, had to study more than 16 hours a day at the school building! For the sake of entering colleges, a school was a place preparing “great testers” who can achieve high standardized test scores. Having a girlfriend/boyfriend was not allowed if it interfered with entering colleges. My schooling experiences were filled with “disciplines,” which made possible the meticulous control of the operations of the body by family, school, and society (Foucault, 1977). I felt jealous of American students who I can see in the Hollywood movies (e.g., *Grease*). Their lives looked like heaven to me: many elective courses, no school uniforms, boys with long hair, numerous after school activities, driving cars, and enjoying weekends with friends. They seemed to be “thrown” into the happiest land where they could enjoy their teenage years.

For him, illusions of American schooling and Americanism, provoked a vision of a country where students enjoyed their freedom, with ample opportunity and complete autonomy in their everyday lives. In Hollywood movies, television shows, and English language textbooks, American teenagers did not seem to be bothered with discipline or the fierce competition of college entrance exams. Rather, they seemed to enjoy their teenage hood with a plethora of creative activities during and after school, lots of freedom, and plenty of time to hang out with boyfriends and girlfriends. Not surprisingly, he began creating his own vision of American life, envying all his friends and relatives privileged enough to immigrate there. In some sense, his knowledge about American society was constructed by the colonizing, Eurocentric, and patriarchal texts presented to him in school (Sleeter, 1996, p. 92). Strikingly similar to America, in Korea, he was explicitly and implicitly schooled to believe that America meant freedom, wealth, and opportunity, a global namesake that has made its mark on the world wide arena. He truly once believed the United States was grounded in a meritocracy, and that opportunities were open to all who worked hard; the possibilities would be endless, he thought. For him, America was not only a country in the world; America became the location where dreams came true.

Carried adrift by his imagination, he began to feel displaced in his own homeland of Korea. Even before, he was granted the opportunity to immigrate, he felt suffocated by his Korean situation: the barriers of social promotions, the disciplining at school, the lack of personal freedom. When a person is culturally, politically, and economically influenced by another country, that place can sometimes become the new, ideal home to live in.

Displacement: Here, There, and There

And so we both had a vision, one bent on the longing and desire for something familiar, something romantic. As she was rudely awakened to her place on the margins of American life, he envisioned the excitement of living at its center. The appeal of belonging to the American context was an illusion we both battled in our situated spaces of everyday life.

During the day, I would sit in wooden desks facing greenboards defaced by white chalk, the Lee press-on nails of Ms. Knez waving hypnotically, carving out swooping lines of capital, cursive G. This was the same year I began cracking the refrigerator door just enough to reach in for Oscar Meyers, just enough to hide the kimchee bottles and marinated gobo root. The same year I began fearing parent visits to school, their broken immigrant English burning holes of hot embarrassment on my baby cheeks. The same year my mother decided to introduce herself as Helen, Hyun being too difficult for 'Americans' to pronounce. And the same year the bathroom mirror in our Arizona adobe home became my worst enemy. I cried many nights back then.

"Where were you born?" he wondered. "Wisconsin," I replied. "No, I mean like, where were you really born?" he asked again clearly dissatisfied. Sometimes I let it go. Sometimes, I irritatingly call out their arrogance. They would flounder; I would revel. "No, I mean, my girlfriend's Korean. I mean, I once had a Korean girlfriend. I mean, a Korean roommate in college," he continues, drowning in his own failed gibberish. Another Korean roommate?

Out of habit, I still scan the room for faces. I gauge my preparedness for discomfort by the proportion of White men who surround me. How will I deal this time; my brown head bobbing in an unpredictable sea of blue and yellow.

"Is English your first language?" said the Columbia University professor to the Asian doctoral student. "Oh, your parents are immigrants. Well, I can give you credit for that."

As I reach back reflectively and unabashedly to understand my contentious relationship with America, the good ole' U.S. of A. I must share myself as ethnic, raced, hurt, angry, from foreigners, hyphenated, and without homeland. "I've never been with an Asian woman before?" he said to me at the bar. "Well, you're certainly not getting with this one."

At a California high school in the sunny suburbs of the South Bay once lived a Great Denial, where 'White People Only' signs were tacked boldly on bathroom doors and confederate flags hung regally from Cherokee jeeps. All was ignored, not at all blissful. Until one day a big yellow bus packed with brown faces pulled into the school parking lot, and the happy story of integration was soon to commence. Naturally tensions arose. A single slice of tomato flew across the shit-stained quad, igniting a chaotic battlefield of reheated hamburger patties and stale French fries. Within minutes, there were two fronts, one White, one Other, and all hell was about to break loose, at least fifty kids on each side, lined up and drawing closer. It was fabulous, it was necessary, I remembered.

At times, I feel corralled into ethnic borders, fenced in by barbed wires and secured with grand gates, rites of passage that decide for me when I am able to feel American or not. I laugh along at American clichés I still don't understand, play cultural educator to Korean cuisine: "Honey, I think they're eating cat," I once heard the White woman say to the White man over Korean food. Oh, but Asian-ness is also the new trend, no? Liberal mucks with Buddhist beads, Barbie doll yoga mats, and retro-cool meditation tea, get in tune with your spiritual side, visit the Orient. Asians temporarily in transit, it's a fad I supposed. "So, are YOU like fresh off the boat?"

If only the world was a mirror and I could see my own reflection, down Broadway, down Amsterdam, at the pub, in the restaurant, am I the forever foreigner? My self-image, it's as if I have forgotten what I look like.

In *Politics of Experience*, R. D. Laing (1983) writes of an existence fragmented by the coercion of material and ideological control. He describes our contentious relationship with society as a form of "repression, denial, splitting, projection, introjection...a form of destructive action on experience" (p. 27), and incites that a failure to reconstitute the wholeness of our being leaves us as:

Bodies half dead; genitals disassociated from heart; heart severed from head; head disassociated from genitals...torn—body, mind, and spirit—by inner contradiction, pulled in different directions. Man [sic] cut off

from his own mind, cut off equally from his own body—a half crazed creature in a mad world. (p. 55)

In these visceral moments when she is forced to reckon with a dominant ideology that labels her accent, her food, her name, as one of a perpetual foreigner and even sometimes as un-human like, she finds herself in a state of being half-dead. As she struggles to swim against the tide of self-doubt, she begins to discover great explanatory power in critical theories, especially as they locate oppression within the social, cultural, institutional mechanisms that become embedded within her social li. It may not be all her fault, she suspects. However, as Paulo Freire (1970) fears, there is an internalized oppression present where the cultural prejudices reared within society transform into poisonous ‘truths,’ inflicting her memories with sharp pangs of violence, isolation, and powerlessness. Mark Tappan (2006) argues that it is not enough to understand individual functioning and the social setting; we must examine what is in between, to “live in the middle,” and focus on mediated actions, the cultural tools that bind individuals to their settings (Wertsch, cited in Tappan, p. 4).

In notions of mediated action—a Marxian analysis of human activity as mediated by material and psychological tools—the ways in which meaning is appropriated in the relationship between individuals and context come under scrutiny (Tappan, 2006). In the case above, these tools may include the literal opinions of others, disbelief in birthplace, “cat food,” Oscar Meyer commercials, the insistent mispronunciation of her mother’s name. Yet, although, she would find great redemption if these in-between explanations were clearly the case, there is something strangely absent for her in all these theories on experience, a combinatorial absence. In critical theory, she feels herself reified, institutionalized; in mediated action, she is overtaken by the tool and ceases to exist. The aesthetics of self, she thinks, cannot be forgotten; they are what make this subject compelling for her. What may account for this heartfelt angst and desperation? And, what may lie beyond the institution, beyond the tool, isn’t there always another explanatory dimension? Therefore, these theories, as valid as they are in their contributions to the narrative, do not allow her to reconcile the estrangement she feels within her own country, and because of this, she continues to find a space that may accept her without such limits and constraints.

It was irony that I felt like “home” when I first moved to the States. Most things were not so strange to me because I thought I was exposed to American culture from English textbooks, movies, and TV shows from AFKN. However, my ideal vision of the States and the American dream began to vanish little by little as time passes by. People treated me like a

tourist or someone who is deficit to American culture. At the beginning of my American life, I thought my Korean accent might be one of the main reasons that people treated me as an alien thus I wanted to speak like a native English speaker. I was naïve enough to think the reduction of my Korean accent would be a ticket to join the mainstream American culture and I signed up for an accent reduction program. I worked hard to discriminate [i/I] and [ae/e] sounds with my speech pathologist.

It did not take long to realize that my accent was not the major reason in being treated as an alien. I am treated as a “perpetual foreigner” (Wu, 2001) and alien even before I talk with people. They always want to make sure that I can speak in English. Many people assume that I am a tourist and do not fully understand English. A couple of months ago, three of my Korean friends and I were involved in a minor car accident. The first question the police officer asked to us was, “Can you speak English?” They began interrogating the accident after making sure that we could understand his English. I wonder if he would ask the question if we were Caucasian. Day by day, I realized that my identity is defined mainly by my skin color in the States. I began to feel the “power of skin color” (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992) when you stereotype or label a person’s identity, which is “Yellow.”

I had acquired a new habit in the States. When I confronted a situation that turned my face red, I automatically imagined, “What if I were not an Asian?” I had to deal with my master’s student who said an f word in his reflection sheet about the course. I designed an activity as a part of brainstorming for action research projects. A student wrote, “I am wondering if I didn’t finish this worksheet and said f**k it!” I was haunted by this f word all the way home with a myriad of conflicting and strong thoughts. My thoughts, automatically, were haunted by a power structure of the White/non White, American/non American, and Native/non Native English speaking dichotomies.

I shared this episode with my colleagues. They told me this kind of occurrence happens to many adjunct faculty members. One of them said that “That’s not a big deal, don’t take it personally!. This is not related with your ethnicity or accent.” The next week, I talked with the student. He said it was a long day at his high school and he did not know I would collect the sheet. During this episode, I, again, thought about the stereotypical power dynamic of a bold American White student was trying to rebel against an Asian instructor. I was really bothered by my linear way of thinking that connecting this occurrence with a race/ethnicity category. I asked myself why I was automatically attributing this episode to race. In the US context, I was getting programmed to attribute incidents to race/ethnicity.

In his autobiographical book, *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*, Frank Wu (2002) describes specific experiences with racism that position him as a 'perpetual foreigner' in the United States. He argues that Asians are continually being dejected from the national fabric of society and in doing so, analyzes two distinctive phrases common to Asian American experience, 'You speak English so well!' and 'Where are you *originally* from?' As these phrases rule out Asians from the American profile, he says, "everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome" (p. 79). As seen in the autobiographical account given above, he understands Wu's notion of the 'perpetual foreigner' and sees his American dream give way to the xenophobic realities of everyday experience. Subtle yet forceful, incidences such as that with the police officer and with the swearing student, displaces him from the ideological attributes normally assigned to American life. As he feels a sense of alienation, he asks himself, "What's wrong with my face in this country?," "Why am I obsessed with race in America?" When the New York City police officer sees four Asian faces, the officer's initial response was to instantly determine their English abilities. Their 'yellowness' was the collar they wore; the police officers, who assumed authoritative power in the situation, may have identified them as subordinates in the country they now live (Pheterson, 1990, p. 35).

His displacement in the United States is again evoked as his colleague advises him, "That's not a big deal, don't take it personally!" In front of his student, he could not help but wallow in a sudden sense of inferiority, resignation, and isolation. The authorization of standard-accented English, as acceptable American English, might have worked as the mediated tool of which Tappan (2006) speaks. Unfortunately, race-based oppression has become a reality for this Korean immigrant who was once largely unfamiliar with racism, Korea being one of the most culturally homogenous nations in the world. In America, however, he inhabits a social space where members of minority groups are forced to confront the stereotypic images that certain elements of society have constructed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). His uncomplicated vision of America as a land of opportunity and freedom is now found sadly tarnished. He mourns this, and thus, continues to seek another space with greater safety from the confusion of finding home-and-homeland.

Loss of Home-and-Homeland

The tires of the SUV came to a halt that day. I saw the angered pain in the eyes of my mother as I unleashed my un-patriotism, un-aware that for my mother patriotism was privilege, an invaluable gift she and my fa-

ther toiled and sacrificed to give. They traveled thousands of miles, worked in Chinese restaurants and Campbell soup factories, hand car-washes, family housing projects, and I was to be un-patriotic of America! How dare I? I never saw it through those eyes, how spoiled, how stubborn, how unappreciative, how unknowing and privileged I am! I'll try, I said embarrassingly.

I did go to Korea once or twice, at a time when I knew I was not American enough, when I longed painfully for a place to feel camouflaged, unnoticed, and normal. And so I flew back to the 'country of my origin,' to Seoul, to grandparents I seldom saw, and cousins, uncles, and aunts, I hardly knew. Day one: "Korean women cannot have skin that dark," she said on our way to the bathhouse, where a brute Korean woman in a shower cap was hired to scrub with scalding hot water the sun-kissed brown from my naked body. Day two: "Korean women cannot have such low voices," I heard on the way to the hospital, where the doctor jabbed a metal rod and cotton swab down my throat, gave me an injection in the bottom, and sent me home with a little bag full of saw dust and brightly colored pills. Three: "How sad for you, your Korean is so bad." Four: "Your laugh is too loud." Five: "You drink too much." Six: "You talk too much." Seven: "Nothing in this store will fit you." Eight: "In Korea, women with big feet are considered ugly." And so on, until I returned to the United States, hopelessly devoted to no-one and nothing, strangely caught in limbo, one said 'cultural crisis,' and forced to create in-between spaces of neither/nor, both/and, Thirdspaces of up-rooted settlements and ruptured returns.

In the movie, *The Way Home*, a spoiled young boy from Seoul is left with his mute grandmother in a remote countryside village. Stubborn in his ways, he ridicules his crippled grandmother ruthlessly, calling her retarded and dumb. He urinates in her shoes, tears apart her modest home for money, and throws tantrums for Kentucky Fried Chicken. Yet, she is patient with him, unrelenting in her love, and with time, after much pain, he turns into himself to find a tenderness between them. A few months later, his mother, a bit more financially stable, returns to the village to retrieve him. He is clearly distraught, desperately needing to communicate with a grandmother who cannot speak. He leaves her with self-addressed postcards, drawn himself, and through the back window of a dusty bus, he cries to her until she is out of his sight. The title of this movie may hint less about this boy finding his way back to his physical 'home' in the city of Seoul, and more about his spiritual awakening to the spatiality and experience of 'home' with his grandmother. If conceived as a Thirdspace of both/and also, the dimensions of this boy, his single mother, his city life, his grandmother, his personality,

his age, Korea's push for modernization, capitalization, consumerism, are just a few of the endless and infinite possibilities in understanding this story; the journey home then becomes truly elusive and rich in depth. At the core is a boy in an evolving moment of self, and there is hope he will return to Seoul a changed individual.

In some ways, the relationship of this young boy with home, in both a physical and metaphysical sense, is similar to the autobiographies shared above. With her imaginings in tact, her desperate need for belonging sends her to the 'homelands' of her Korean heritage, where she hopes to discover release from the alienation she feels in the American context. However, she quickly learns that she has landed in a country quite foreign from the pre-conceptions of what she thought a 'homeland' should be. Rather than being embraced, she realizes her pleas for cultural nurturing will go unheard here. Harshly rejected, she now sees that transnationalism is much more complicated and messy than previously anticipated; the real-and-imagined spaces of home-and-homeland are not necessarily about borders and nations at all. Unable to reconcile 'home' for 'homeland,' she is confused: How arrogant for her to think a shared past would promise a shared future? Clearly, she has lost both; and returns to America with fallen dreams and on shaky grounds, if there is any grounding at all.

While I was getting lost the feeling of the ideal "home" in the States, I was losing my home-and-homeland at the same time. When I visited Korea, this chaos becomes bigger and bigger like a tornado. When I planned to visit Korea, I was thrilled to enjoy my home and homeland as an insider. At the JFK airport, I was excited that I would not be estranged once I arrive at home country.

However, as soon as I arrived at Incheon airport, I could not feel homeland as I used to do. I was lost at the airport due to new public transport system: I could not find a place for subways or buses. I also was lost in a bus: I did not know how much to pay. I went to a dentist and forgot how to say "implement" into Korean. Fortunately, the receptionist understood the English term. A TV show addressed the lives of Vietnamese wife, a working class husband, and their children. A TV talk show program broadcasted foreign women and their lives in Korea. The 60 minutes talked about undocumented immigrants from China, Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines, Mongol, and other countries.

I was shocked by all of these new phenomena within a couple of days. I felt that I lost my homeland. I am estranged from Korean culture because I have now lived outside of that culture for a while. . I am alien-

ated from my ethnical and national country of origin. "You don't enjoy Korean food, shows, and games as much as you did before." Mom said as a joke. Truly, I lost my homeland. I am getting lost!

Tired of being treated as an outsider in the United States, he returns to Korea excited to take a rest in his homeland. Eager to feel 'home' again in the country of his birth, he realizes upon arrival that he is again an outsider to the rapidly, changing mainstream culture of Korea. Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore. Like the quote from *The Wizard of Oz*, he's got a feeling he does not belong to Korea anymore. Throughout his visit, he finds himself routinely criticized by other Koreans. "You are too Americanized Korean that does not follow 'wonderful' Korean tradition." Sometimes, he can still hear, "You are not like other Koreans!" Pushed and pulled by this, he is caught within an 'in-betweenness' (Suetsugu, 2006), trapped between his Korean origin and his displaced American experiences. He has lost both home-and-homeland and returns to America with a heart broken by his loss of Korea, physically, emotionally, and historically.

Mourning and loss are eloquently spoken about in Patti Lather's (2003) deconstruction of scientism, specifically her 'twisting away' from certainty toward a more capacious, permissive methodology. Although our subjects of study differ, there are intersections mirrored in the language through which Lather speaks. Accepting the loss of certainty, Lather says, becomes the "very force of learning and what one loves when lovely knowledge is lost is the promise of thinking and doing otherwise" (p. 267). How might a stance of 'getting lost' produce a new layer of knowledge and produce knowledge differently? As the autobiographies illustrate, there is an emergence of something new when something is lost. The loss of home-and-homeland, although devastating at first, creates a space to unleash a sense of self less restrained by geographical borders and ethnic loyalties. Of course, a nostalgia for Korea as the home-and-homeland will always be carried forth by tender longings for origin; however, in a created Thirdspace beyond the empirical measures of what constitutes American-ness and Korean-ness, these national borders are transcended and such imagined necessities become much more complicated. In this vein, getting lost becomes a good thing. It allows for a sense of self to rise to the fore; we are not simply one or the other, but there is always another, and another, and another to the dimensions and possibilities of our spatial being.

Re-envisioning into Thirdspaces

And so my 'American' identity is not whole. It is hyphenated, fragmented, split, a tug-of-war. Korean-American? Korean? American? American-Korean? Ah! Pushed and pulled into mainstream assimilation, pushed and pulled into foreign territories, pushed and pulled into great borderlands, with one foot planted as Asian Other and one foot teetering on American pie and homecoming parties. To what am I supposed to pay allegiance? "Why don't you go back to Korea then?" she asked.

With time, 'America' and I have learned to live an estranged, yet amicable relationship. I know now that there is no physical site, no geographic space that normalizes me, yet in this loss of location emerges a new vision of home. This home is birthed from displacement and loss, strengthened by pain, and refuses to choose or be chosen. This home is ambiguous and ever-changing, un-categorizable and un-definable. It is a hybrid of my cultural origins and my life experience, yet not in a formulaic sense where one half and one half constitutes a whole. It is present in non-presence, backdropped and foregrounded, it appears and disappears with its own sense of liberty.

I still walk down New York City streets to hear 'ni hao,' 'Miss Saigon,' and 'China-fer' yelled from across the way. "I hope you're Japanese 'cause I hate Chinese people," he said to me without hesitation.

"Where are you from?" I say, "Korean" because I know that's what he is probing for.

In strange ways, I am thankful to these teachers who teach me to not pledge allegiance blindly, to be angry, to show dissent, to persevere, to understand critically. I wonder if one day 'America' and I will reconcile, if there will be a time when 'you' love me for who I am and for what I look like, when I don't have to hyphenate myself to satisfy me or to satisfy you. Can time really tell? And, what would it say?

I used to envision the world with my fixed and unified identity lenses as a Korean or a non-permanent alien in the States. I used to have lots of questions about my identities. How much am I supposed to be assimilated with American mainstream culture to feel safety and comfort? Does assimilation mean to "bleach" my yellowness and become "whiter" to survive in this white-privileged society? Does this assimilation change America as my real home? How can I negotiate my cultural conflicts that are happening in Korea? Do I still have home in Korea? Is Korea my homeland? When I envision my identities with a binary concept of Korean-ness and American-ness, I used to feel that I was not welcomed fully in the States nor in Korea. I lost all of them, home-and-homeland! American mainstream society does not welcome me due to my accent and yellowness, whereas Korean mainstream culture does not welcome me because of my objection to "perform" Korean-ness.

In Thirdspace, however, a binary notion of "assimilation" and "negotiation" are re-envisioned with new possibilities. I don't have to try to find a stable identity as either Koreanized American or Americanized Korean. In this another space, my subjectivity can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew (Bhabha, 1994). I am pleased by marching toward this land of ambiguity and lost, which is a good thing! (Latber, 2007). Ambiguity and chaos open new doors for possibilities, mobility, and wide-openness.

After my transnational experiences in Korea, the States, and more, I am ready to challenge labeling myself with a static or fixed identity as a Korean or a non-permanent alien. I deny any version of an essentialized "self" or place and reject possibilities of identifying with any collective "we" (Miller, 2006). In this malleable and moving Thirdspace, I am a potential agency of the subject as always in the making.

There is an air of composure that drifts through the final section of these autobiographies, such that in the struggle to find a location, the dis-location of home-and-homeland has brought a settling to the spirit. This settlement is certainly not fixed, but rather embedded in real-and-imagined spaces, such that as it moves, the relationship with home is also in movement. Although, our stories began in two countries far across the oceans, one in the Western world and one in the Far East, they collide and intersect in peculiar ways. Both hold an imagined transnational vision, a physical and real displacement, a sense of loss, and a creation of a new Thirdspace. In his work, Bhabha (1994) defines this Thirdspace as a space of radical openness, an interstitial space where other positions emerge. According to Bhabha, a Thirdspace gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation in meaning and representation. In regards to this Thirdspace, he says:

The intervention of the Thirdspace of enunciation destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is revealed as an integrated, open expanding code. Such an intervention challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People. (p. 54)

Even though, the loss of home-and-homeland brings forth the inability to claim a national identity, we realize we are both perceived in public spaces as simply Asian. Yet, this Thirdspace of Bhabha allows us to challenge these homogenizing and unifying categories that haunt our racially divided multicultural curriculum. If we conceive of curriculum as a 'running of the course,' our subjective journey with the public transcripts and social landscapes of our lives (Pinar, 2004; Pinar & Grumet, 1976), then we must break silence with the racial borders that quiet the intricate stories within. As we find current presidential politics and standardized test scores disaggregated and racialized, we wonder how a Thirdspace may return the nuance and conflict that exists within the labels and definitions that attempt to portray us. What would it mean to work from a conception that represents the complexity of identity, a complexity that we have always been living?

We encounter Thirdspace as an-Other way of analyzing our experiences, where our ethnicity, class, gender, are then accompanied by an infinite list of possible others. We are not fulfilled by an uncomplicated Asian identity, nor do we agree that any effort to identify fully as a national collective is possible. As Adriana Cavarero (2000) articulates, "no matter how much you are similar and consonant...your story is never my story. No matter how much the larger traits of our life-stories are similar, I do not

recognize myself in you, even less, in the collective we” (p. 92). Therefore, emphasized throughout, we move away from the singularity of nations as a primary conceptual and organizational category, and instead, present our autobiographies to initiate new spaces of knowing in the tale of ethnicity, immigration, travel, and self.

Notes

¹ In his book, *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) presents his conceptualization of Third Space (two words) to signify his interrogation of cultural production as transgressive. As he disrupts the notion of national affiliation and identity, his Third Space speaks to the complexity in-between the general condition of society and the specific realities of individuals. However, Edward Soja (1996) and Henri Lefebvre (1991) present Thirdspace (one word) from the standpoint of the postmodern geographer and sociologist, respectively. They introduce imagination as a critical component to the constitution of physical space as a site for social production. As space and spatiality encompass an infinite multitude of dimensions, this then becomes conceptualized as an inconceivable Thirdspace. Together, these two variations of Thirdspace provide a platform from which our experiences can be analyzed and understood, especially in terms of nationality, identity, transnational location, and imagination.

² We also recognize gender as an important defining characteristic when exploring our relationship with identity and home. We have had many discussions on the disparate treatment afforded Asian females versus Asian males, and the construction of gender as a transgressive cultural condition (Butler, 1999). However, in this work, we do not explicitly discuss gender, but do acknowledge it as one in the infinite list of possibilities for understanding experience.

³ As a point of explanation, we struggled intently over how to represent and analyze two interweaving stories within the limits of text. We utilize pronouns here, specifically ‘she’ and ‘he,’ when examining our own divergent stories under the various subtitles. Using ‘I’ would cause great confusion, although we did consider this as possibly generative. Toward the end of this piece, when we discuss our revisioning into Thirdspace, we use ‘we’ to signify our commonalities, the creation of a new space of relation.

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