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# From America Town to America: *Fox Girl* and the Ethics of Interracial Relations in South Korea's Camptowns

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## Abstract

The politics of identity for multiracial children in South Korea is a growing ethnic and ethical issue. Discussions regarding the ethnic identity of multiracial Koreans cannot be formed without considering its ethical implications. Ethics become central to the formation of ethnic identity in that it points to how one is regarded as an irreducible other. In this essay, I argue that gender and ethnic identification is a form of ethical articulation of Korean racial politics. I explore the relationship between Korean women who worked in camptowns and American racial politics in Nora Okja Keller's *Fox Girl*. Camptown or *kijich'on* women have long represented the irreducible other, the "heart of darkness" at the center of race relations between the U.S. and South Korea. They are living reminders of sexual domination, U.S. imperialism, and geographical and political divisions between North and South Korea. Although camptown women were dubbed as "ambassadors to America" through the sexual service they provided, they were ostracized by other Koreans for engaging in interracial relations. Clearly aware of neocolonial domination, Keller attempts to represent the complex conditions in which *kijich'on* women were used by the Korean government to mediate political borders and bolster the Korean economy while outcasted to the margins of society.

## Keywords

the interracial, camptowns, sexuality,
*Fox Girl*, immigration, the Korean War

## Introduction

In the spring of 2006, football star Hines Ward returned to South Korea with his mother, Young Hee Kim. The celebrated wide receiver for the Pittsburgh Steelers and MVP of Super Bowl XL returned to the land of his birth for the first time and witnessed the racism and discrimination that multiracial children face in South Korea. Ward himself is bi-racial. His mother is Korean and his father is African-American; they met while Ward's father was a soldier stationed in Korea. The politics of identity for multiracial children in South Korea is a growing ethnic and ethical issue. Although they are part-Korean, multiracial children face blatant racism and discrimination due to their ethnic difference. These children are in a state of exile within their own country.

Discussions regarding the ethnic identity of multiracial South Koreans cannot be held without considering the ethical implications. Ethics is central to the formation of ethnic identity in that it is concerned with how one is regarded as an irreducible other. Ethics, literally meaning the theory of living, from its Greek root *ethikos*, articulates the borders of how ethnicity is defined in South Korea. Ethnicity, derived from the Greek word *ethnikos*, means foreign or national. When we talk about the ethics of ethnicity, we refer to what it really *means* when we define an individual based on the (inevitably limited) categories of ancestry, nationality, culture, religion, or language—that is, what such definitions of "otherness" mean in relation to ourselves. The ethics of ethnicity in the case of multiracial children in South Korea is intimately bound up with South Korea's society and culture and with the social, racial, and colonial dimensions of its history. The growing number of multiracial children in South Korea is the result of Japanese colonization, U.S. military presence, and the increasing number of "foreign" immigrants entering the country as workers, students, and brides.[1]

The complex issue of "multiracials" in South Korea is the result of many factors which include, but are not limited to, interracial intimacies during the Japanese colonial period, multi-national immigrants to Korea, foreign brides coming to Korea, and interracial intimacies between *kijich'on* women and American servicemen. However, in this essay I will look specifically at the relationship between South Korean women who worked in "camptowns" during the 1960s and 70s and American racial politics of the mid-twentieth century. I will argue that ethnic identifications are really ethical articulations that place moral values on individuals. I will show how the bodies of *kijich'on* women represent the ethical problem at the heart of race relations in South Korea, how the discourses of American segregation, racism, sexism, classism, and military dominance circulated, intersected, and shaped the way in which American soldiers and Koreans viewed and view *kijich'on* women and their biracial children.

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[1] South Korean government statistics show that in 2005, 14% of all marriages involved marriage to a foreigner. More than 30% of marriages involving foreigners are unions between Korean rural men and foreign brides, particularly from Southeast Asia. According to Pearl S. Buck International Foundation, approximately 800,000 foreigners comprise Korea's population of 48 million. The foundation was set up in Korea in 1965 and works on behalf of multiracial children. The number of mixed raced children in Korea is approximately 35,000 and rising. Currently, about 15% of all newborns in Korea are from interracial marriages. The foundation estimates that by 2020, multiracial will comprise 30% of all newborns in Korea.

The first camptown in South Korea was established in 1945 in Bupyong near the western port city of Inchon. The growth of the camptowns followed the growth of the U.S. military presence in South Korea. In the 1960s, when camptowns were at their height, there were more than 30,000 *kijich'on* women serving 62,000 U.S. soldiers stationed in South Korea. "America Town," a city in Kunsan in the province of North Cholla, was and continues to be one of the primary camptowns that serve American G.I.s. It is unique in that it is a town built exclusively to cater to the economic, social, and sexual needs of American soldiers. Unlike other camptowns, guards are posted at the gates of America Town; only U.S. soldiers and Koreans with registration cards are allowed to enter.

Nora Okja Keller's novel *Fox Girl* is one of the few literary works that discusses the plight of biracial children in South Korea's camptowns. *Fox Girl* takes place in post-Korean War America Town where the abandoned biracial children of U.S. soldiers struggle to survive. The protagonists of the novel, Hyun Jin, Sookie, and Lobetto are trapped in a vicious cycle of poverty, child prostitution, racism, and the desire to escape to America. They hope to one day leave the slums of America Town for some sort of imagined paradise in the United States. In a typical missionary school for biracial "throwaway children of the neighborhood" (Keller 59), the kids are prompted by the teacher to answer the following questions:

> *"What are you?"*
> "American!"
> *"Why?"*
> "Our fathers are American!"
> *"Which is better: Korea or America?"*
> "America!"
> *"Where do you want to go?"*

"America!" (Keller 59-60)

The bi-racial children of *kijich'on* women are treated as outcasts of and by Korean society. These children are the physical embodiment of Korea's sexual, economic, and military subordination to and dependence on the U.S. By the end of Keller's novel the two female protagonists, Hyun Jin and Sookie, are able to realize their dream and leave America Town for America. They are both recruited to work as prostitutes at a club in Hawaii; it is their female bodies that allow them passage to the U.S. Throughout Asian American history, Asian women's sexuality has served as a crucial factor in their immigration to the U.S. as "picture" brides, war brides,[2] mail order brides, and sex workers. It is clear to see that the bodies of *kijich'on* women are sexually and racially marked by both state and colonial power.

Feminist scholars have noted how governments use women and gendered ideology as instruments of power in international politics.[3] The implementation of the *kijich'on* or camptown system is an example of how women's bodies are used and exchanged as pawns in the game of international politics. Within the camptowns women's bodies negotiated international political, cultural, and economic policies. *Kijich'on* women played a key role in reinvigorating the Korean economy through the pleasurable consumption of their bodies. Korean women who worked in the camptowns had access to the American dollar when the value of the Korean currency, *won*, was severely depressed. Women's bodies served to facilitate the importation of foreign currency, American culture, and even American segregation. In an economically depressed post-war Korea, American rock-and-roll, clothing, hairstyles, foods, and the American dollar all represented material prosperity. Its desire to aquire American goods and maintain friendly political ties with the U.S. justified the South Korean government's sanctioning of the camptowns.

## Ambassadors to America

*Kijich'on* women were euphemistically dubbed "ambassadors to America" through the sexual services they provided. These women were sanctioned and approved by the South Korean government to serve American G.I.s and maintain smooth political and economic relations with the U.S. In essence, the racialized and sexualized bodies of *kijich'on* women were used as vehicles to ensure the military, political, and economic well-being of Korea.

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[2] In the twentieth century, military brides have played a crucial part in the formation of Korean immigrant communities. It is estimated that military brides are responsible for bringing 40-50 percent of all Korean immigrants since 1965. Please see Daniel B. Lee.

[3] Please see Bunch, Choi and Kim, Enloe, Jeffords, Stetz and Oh.

The ethically compromised bodies of these women represent the darkness at the heart of the imperial project. The bodies of *kijich'on* women stand as dark manifestations of the contradictory nature of both American imperialism and Korean nationalism. Although these women were called ambassadors to America, they were viewed as being subordinate and dispensable by American soldiers. While they were praised for negotiating cultural politics between the U.S. and Korea through their intimate relationships with white and black American servicemen, these women were scorned by the Korean public for mixing with foreigners. Koreans pride themselves as a pure race whose limited interaction with foreigners has gotten their country the nickname "the hermit kingdom." However, Korea's history reveals multiple interactions, confrontations, and conflicts with China, Mongolia, Japan, the Soviet Union, and the U.S.[4] Hence, the emphasis on a single-race Korean state is not so much the result of Korea's isolation but rather of its desire to resist foreign influence.

During the period of the Japanese occupation of Korea, which extended from 1910-1945, speaking the Korean native language *han-gul* was a crime punishable by death. All Koreans were required to abandon their traditional family names and adopt Japanese ones. Because employment and admission into schools were virtually impossible without Japanese names, most Koreans changed their family names. During this colonial period, Korean nationalist resistance groups emphasized their racial identity and spoke *han-gul* in secret. After the post-liberation period of the 1950s, the U.S. government played a crucial role in folding Korea's strong nationalist memory into the discourse of anti-communism.[5] During the 1960s and 70s, South Korea underwent substantial economic and political restructuring. As the country modernized itself and increased its presence on the global stage it attempted to hold on to the discourses of nationalism and ethnocentrism. During this transitional stage, the role of Korean women as guardians of tradition, culture, morals, and the Korean bloodline was emphasized.[6]

These gendered roles were very much influenced by Korea's Confucian beliefs. The Confucian philosophy creates a hierarchy within familial and social structures that places males above females, and this philosophy dominated traditional Korean culture. The Confucian ideals also bolster the notion of racial purity, especially of the women. By sleeping with foreigners, *kijich'on* women have in effect disrespected the Confucian doctrines that Koreans hold so dear. *Kijich'on* women who interacted and had sexual relations with foreigners on a daily basis defied the Confucian notion that women should serve as custodians of Korean tradition and moral values, in order to ensure racially pure progeny. Rather than safeguarding Korea's collective national fantasy, *kijich'on* women's interracial intimacies engendered the national dilemma of bi-racial children. In writing about *kijich'on* women's experience in the camptowns, Keller disrupts the normative pattern of Confucianism and calls attention to the neglect of *kijich'on* women's voices and stories.

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[4] For more on the history of Korea, see Kim.

[5] For more on the relationship between anticommunism and the construction of South Korea's identity, see Namhee Lee.

[6] For details, please see Edwards and Roces.

These women have long represented the irreducible other, the "heart of darkness" at the center of race relations between the U.S. and South Korea. *Kijich'on* women are living reminders of sexual domination, U.S. imperialism, and geographical and political divisions between North and South Korea. They are symbols of American intervention during the Korean War (1950-1953), the division of the Korean peninsula that ensued, and American neocolonialism. The number of U.S. military bases in South Korea is indicative of the latter's neocolonial status.[7] According to the U.S. Department of Defense 2004 baseline report, there are 105 military sites in South Korea. The large number of U.S. forces stationed in South Korea points to a hegemonic militarism that exerts colonial authority over Koreans.[8]

Militarism, of course, further strengthens the patriarchal gender ideology of male domination in Korean society. The administrations of recent Korean presidents who had formerly been military generals—Pak Chonghui (1961-1979), Chon Tuhwan (1980-1987) and Ro T'aeu (1987-1992)—left little room for questioning foreign and domestic governmental policies. The rhetoric of anti-communism and nationalism was so powerful in post-war Korea that it curbed any possible dissent on the issue of U.S.-Korea relations. To question the *kijich'on* system, which provided comfort to U.S. soldiers, was to question the South Korean government's relationship with the United States. It is interesting to note that although these presidents damned the comfort women system of colonial Japan in order to bolster the rhetoric of anti-colonialism and Korean nationalism, they sanctioned a similar type of comfort system in the camptowns.

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[7] United States Forces Korea (USFK) consists of ground, air, and naval divisions of the U.S. military stationed in South Korea. Army has 19,755, Navy has 274, Air Force 8,815, Marines, 242 for a total of 29,086. The USFK forces are peacekeepers. To date, South and North Korea have not signed a peace treaty. Please see Caryl.

[8] When the U.S. planned to revert control of Okinawa to Japan in 1972, South Korea offered Jeju Island as Okinawa's replacement even agreeing to store nuclear weapons on Korean soil. In order to maintain U.S. troops in South Korea, it contributed 50,000 soldiers to American war efforts in Vietnam.

Indeed, feminist scholars have argued that *kijich'on* women represent modern-day versions of the Japanese army's comfort women.[9] However, the general Korean public believes that while comfort women were forced into military sexual slavery by Japanese colonial powers, *kijich'on* women have willingly partaken in sexual activities with American military personnel; thus, unlike the comfort women (many of whom were Korean), *kijich'on* women lack moral character and denigrate Korean national pride and identity. Still, *kijich'on* women are clearly linked to comfort women in that they become sexual commodities exchanged in colonial conquests, but whereas Japan is seen as a former colonizer who has yet to clearly apologize and make full redress for its war crimes, the United States is seen as a savior and ally. In fact, the U.S. occupies an ambivalent position as both savior—rescuing Korea from Japanese colonization and North Korean communism—and neocolonial power.

To publicly acknowledge *kijich'on* women as modern-day comfort women would thus be to shatter America's image as savior. It would also mean confronting both the neocolonial power of the U.S. and the blind eye turned by the South Korean government to the atrocities committed by the U.S. military stationed in Korea. This latter sentiment reveals the bigotry of the Korean government in ingratiating itself to the U.S. by seeking American favors at the cost of Korean women. Hence, while there is a movement currently underway in Korea to obtain redress for comfort women, *kijich'on* women are treated as social pariahs. Indeed, most of the existing academic literature on sex workers in Korea is on comfort women, not *kijich'on* women.

The way in which a society reads its own cultural investments in the representation of these sexualized and racialized bodies plays a key role in international politics. Although the bodies of *kijich'on* women are used by the Korean government to mediate political borders and bolster the Korean economy, these women are still looked down upon with shame because they are a symbol of Korea's cultural and national defilement and subordination. Euphemistically calling *kijichon* women "ambassadors" safeguards Korean masculine authority at the expense of women's bodies and their lives. *Kijich'on* women are projected as the Other, who affirm the self-identity of the Korean nation by being themselves expelled (as if in a sort of self-sacrifice) to its margins. The emotions of trauma, self-hatred, and pathos associated with the Korean term *han* are projected onto the bodies of the outcast *kijich'on* women in order to establish a myth of ethnic homogeneity, restoration, and prosperity for the Korean nation.

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[9] Please see Choi, Stetz and Oh, and Yang .

The Korean female body is intrinsically tied to Korean cultural identity, which in turn may be characterized in terms of *han*. Korean culture cannot truly be understood apart from its *han. Han* signifies a cultural identity based on longing, trauma, and pathos and is deeply wedded to Korea's history of colonization; *han* can be seen as the ethos that pervades the soul of the Korean nation. The notion of *han* permeates Korean culture, including television dramas (soap operas), Korean shamanism, and *pansori*, a Korean genre of music. *Han* is based on a traumatic memory marked by the violence of Korea's history, notably Japan's colonization and the Korean War. *Han* is a collective national feeling of oppression with which Koreans identify.

The female body bears this traumatic memory of *han* and is used to mediate South Korea's patriarchal, anti-colonial, and nationalist imperatives in the 20th century. South Korea's self-identity as a sovereign nation is a distinctly masculine one. To keep itself masculine and sovereign, it must banish the feminine and the subordinate. The bodies of *kijich'on* women are constant reminders of the national oppression of Korea under American military rule as well as Korea's recent history of Japanese colonization. Scholars have found that a sizeable number of women who were forced into sexual slavery during the Japanese colonial period became *kijich'on* women in the post-liberation period.[10] Upon returning to Korea these women found themselves ostracized from their families and Korean society for having defiled themselves at the hands of the Japanese. Both comfort women and camptown women were regarded as outcasts of society for having intimate relations with foreigners and failing to safeguard their bodies and by extension their Confucian duty to uphold chastity and racial purity. Hence, the bodies of these women physically and psychologically embody *han*, Korea's national collective angst regarding the injustices of colonization, military sexual slavery, domination, and systematic infiltration of Korean culture.

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[10] During its occupation of Asia and the Pacific Islands from the 1930s through the duration of WWII, Japan used as many as 200,000 young women from Korea, China, Philippines and in some cases Western Europe for sexual servitude. These comfort women were used to raise the moral of the Japanese troops in battle. For more on case studies of comfort women who later worked in camptowns, see Moon.

Women in colonized nations are doubly oppressed in that they are exploited by the colonizer as well as by the men of their country. In order to overcome or compensate for their sense of emasculation and validate their masculinity, Korean men exercised a double standard, using Korean women to improve their relationships with the U.S. and then treating *kijich'on* women as outcasts for co-mingling with foreigners. The presence of *kijich'on* women reminds Koreans of their subjection under American imperialism. Ji-Yeon Yuh writes:

> For Koreans in the mainstream, it is necessary to condemn these women as whores and/or cynically praise them for patriotism as civilian ambassadors and earners of foreign exchange, all the while relegating them to the shadows. Only by doing so can they ignore/ deny subjugation under a foreign power and the consequent shame, thus allowing the officially sanctioned discourse of Korean sovereignty and American benevolence to remain dominant. America's golden image is left relatively untainted, allowing Koreans to despise camptowns and camptown women even as they believe in America's rhetoric of freedom and the opportunity and longing for material wealth, power and modernity that America symbolizes. (Yuh 21)

The sex work performed by *kijich'on* women allows Korea to uphold its image as a sovereign nation and America to retain its image of wealth, prosperity, and opportunity. By consigning *kijich'on* women to an ethically debased position in society, Koreans can ignore them. Relegating these women to the margins also allows Koreans to enjoy American notions of freedom, American material goods, and American military security without shame, guilt, or compunction. South Korean women are sacrificed and their material bodies sexually consumed by American soldiers in the name of Korean nationalism and economic prosperity. These women are toted as ambassadors whose sexual labor garners material wealth for Korea in the form of American dollars.

## Female Body as Capital

The rhetoric of prostitution in the camptowns is interlinked with the rhetoric of anticommunism and national reconstruction. *Kijich'on* women were ambassadors who facilitated relations with the U.S. and brought foreign currency into Korea. Although prostitution in Korea is illegal and is severely punished, the Korean government was silently complicit in sanctioning prostitution in camptowns. Prostitution in the camptowns provided an avenue for the trafficking of bodies, cultures, and American dollars. The dollar was very important in an impoverished Korea where the *won*, the Korean currency, was weak and inflated. In 1987, the U.S. forces contributed an estimated $1 billion to the South Korean economy, or about 1% of the total GNP.[11] Prostitution in the camptowns not only brought about material capital but also symbolic capital. According to Pierre Bourdieu, symbolic capital is a disguised form of profit drawn from ideological labor rather than from direct economic exchange. Symbolic capital often takes the seemingly disinterested form of a gift with no overt expectation of direct reciprocity, yet such a display of material power is still felt to anticipate some form of return from the gift's recipients, which often allows the gift-giver to exercise economic and political domination. In Keller's novel, the characters marvel at and desire American goods. The character of Sookie tells Hyun Jin:

> "Try some candy," Sookie said, unwrapping a bar. "It's called Hersheys." She broke off a piece and popped it into my mouth. Sweet explosion, dark and bitter as blood, erupted in my mouth. Delicious. American. "My mother said darkies are the kindest," said Sookie, her teeth glistening with strings of chocolate. "The most grateful. They go with anybody who is lighter than them. Even the ugly ones." She gulped the last of the Hersheys. "I could get a darkie," she said, licking her teeth. "Even you could, maybe." (Keller 13)

In the segregated atmosphere of America Town, Sookie's mother caters to African-American soldiers whom she notes are the kindest toward Korean women since they are lighter in complexion than them. She is also able to acquire American goods such as Hersheys chocolate, hotdogs, and Pond's cream from her GI boyfriends. Hersheys chocolate represented all that was American—luxury, sweetness, and seductive power. It was not uncommon to see American soldiers passing out chocolate to Korean children. Historically, chocolate is a product of the Spanish colonization of Central America. Spain introduced chocolate to Europe where it was a delicacy enjoyed by kings and aristocrats.[12] That is to say, the history of chocolate is that of racial, colonial, and class domination.

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[11] With the withdrawl of 20,000 U.S. troops from Korea, many camptowns experienced an economic slump. Many women and businesses that catered to U.S. soldiers were displaced financially and geographically ("My Sister's Place" 12).

Keller clearly portrays the hierarchy of racial, sexual, and class power in her book. While living with her African-American boyfriend Chazu, Sookie steals from him. Initially she steals small things like American coins, shot glasses, and Hanes underwear. However, as time goes by she becomes more daring, stealing men's shoes, a blender, reading glasses, and a camera. Sookie and Hyun Jin have no need for such items as "the blender [which], its tail of cord hanging limp and useless without an outlet, sat neglected in the middle of the kitchen floor" (Keller 176). However, these items represent, signify, symbolize American economic and cultural power. Sookie says, "Who cares if you need it? It's American!" (Keller 177). The symbolic capital of America is manifest in the seductive power of American culture and material goods. Koreans in post-war Korea desired for all things American, from items as simple as Hersheys chocolate or Hanes underwear to a life in America *via* marriage to an American soldier.

In her essay "Nationalism and Construction of Gender in Korea," Chungmoo Choi argues that in an occupied space, a gift economy transforms into a sexual economy, firmly establishing the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized as a gendered and sexual relationship. The power relationship between the colonizer and the colonized translates not only into material goods but also into gendered and racial "capital" or forms of exchange. Within this system of gift-exchange, we witness the commodification of, and desire for, obvious objects such as Hersheys chocholate but also for female bodies. Sookie gets her breasts augmented and tells Hyun Jin: "use this for bait and some GI is going to gobble you up" (Keller 175) and take you to America. This "corporealization" of Hyun Jin and Sookie's bodies is what ultimately allows them to cross over from America Town to America.

In her interview with Young-Oak Lee, Keller notes that her characters Hyun Jin and Sookie use their bodies as capital which they sell in exchange for geographic and financial mobility.

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[12] For more on the history of chocolate, please refer to Sophie D. Coe and Michael D. Coe.

> LEE: But Hyun Jin seems to have some expertise in handling the male. Does she regard prostitution as work? Using her body as capital?
>
> KELLER: That's what she sees all around her. Both she and Sookie have grown up with that idea, that their body perhaps is their one commodity to sell.
>
> LEE: The legend of a fox girl transformed in the novel encourages Hyun Jin in a way to give up, but to make use of her sexuality to overcome her impoverished, degrading living environment. Again was it your intention?
>
> KELLER: Using the fox girl story, it just seemed to me that, there are so many different ways to take that legend, and throughout the book I tried to present different versions of it or to twist it in different ways. A fox is a shape shifter, and so throughout the novel I try to kind of shift always. (Lee 160)

The story of the fox-lady is a traditional Chinese legend of young, attractive women who lured men (often married men) to have sex with them and then (even in the act of sex) changed back into foxes and killed their partner. Thus these young Korean girls have an essentially predatory, fox-lady's view of the American GIs. The *kijich'on* women's ability to shape-shift is also their deceptive skill in the art of "exchange" with American men, their ability to negotiate for immigration to the U.S. as a soldier's wife or else as a prostitute. Hyun Jin and Sookie realize that their body is the only bargaining chip they possess and like the fox-lady's own ability to transform herself, it is a powerful one.

In contrast, Lobetto, the main bi-racial male character, has an African-American father who writes to him and promises to bring him to America one day. Lobetto's father exercised his financial power as an American GI in Korea. The camptown children are well aware of the power of the American dollar. Lobetto reminds Hyun Jin:

> "Remember when we were little and I was the one who could buy candy? I could buy anything I wanted from your daddy—the whole store if I wanted to. Remember when my daddy was in Korea?"
>
> "Yeah, yeah, you were the big shot then GI baby." (Keller 95)

However, Lobetto's financial position as a "GI baby" is overshadowed by his dark skin and African-American heritage. Throughout the novel, he is marginalized and called derogatory terms like "black dung boy" (Keller 178). Lobetto snarls at Hyun Jin:

> "But you still thought you were better than me, didn't you? Because I'm half-black." He spoke the words coolly, as if they didn't matter, but when he took a sip of tea, he grimaced as if the tea soured his stomach.
>
> "Not true." I shook my head. "Everyone was jealous 'cause you were half-American. We thought you would be the one to go to America."
>
> "I will go." (Keller 95)

At the end of the novel, Hyun Jin and Sookie go to America, whereas Lobetto is forced to remain behind in Korea. Their recognition that their own female bodies are symbolic capital and their ability (like foxes) to corporealize these bodies is what gives Hyun Jin and Sookie the power to cross over to America. Because they are "shape-shifters," fox-girls, as the title of Keller's novel suggests, they can manipulate their shape and navigate across boundaries. They escape from a life as mere victims of a vicious cycle of prostitution, poverty and abuse; however, once in America they realize that the land of liberty is also plagued with racism, classism, sexism, and poverty.

## Interracial Intimacies

The struggle for their civil rights by minorities in the U.S. in the 1960s was part of a larger international *zeitgeist*, and as such related to student protests (especially in the U.S.) against America's involvement in Vietnam, student protests (especially in France) against the power of university administrations to control curricula, and other such "revolts" against the established power-structures. However, an important reason for America's 1960s Civil Rights movement was also international pressure for the U.S. to practice what it preached regarding democracy, freedom, and equality. The Communist Party (in its various forms America's ostensible "enemy" in both Vietnam and South Korea) was known for its work with the African-American community during the era of segregation. In the famous Scottsboro case, the International Labor Defense (ILD) arm of the Party reached out to defend the rights of African-Americans. In 1931, nine black men were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to death for raping two white women riding in the same train. These men were charged and convicted even though none of them shared the same boxcar with either of the women they were accused of raping. The Scottsboro case drew the attention of not only Americans but the whole international community. It begged the question of how equal and free the U.S. was in its treatment of its own black citizens. For the U.S. government, getting rid of racial segregation was thus a necessary political move, for it was a way of demonstrating the superiority of American democracy to Soviet and East Asian Communism during the Cold War.

Racial discrimination in military bases and camps like America Town in South Korea therefore posed a big political problem for the U.S. It feared that North Korea might point out the obvious racial discrimination in the camptowns as a blatant contradiction of America's espousal of democracy and equality. When U.S. soldiers were first stationed in Korea (1945-1948) and throughout the Korean War (1950-1953), the U.S. armed forces was still segregated. Although President Truman signed Executive Order 9981 desegregating the U.S. Armed Forces in July of 1948, desegregation did not fully take effect until after the end of the war. When the camptowns were constructed in Korea, they were built for a segregated military.[13] There were white and black towns, clubs specifically for white soldiers and others for black soldiers.

While desegregation was slowly taking place in the U.S. in the 1960s and 70s, American military commanders in Korea maintained a segregationist ideology, one to which it had grown accustomed during the Korean War. The tension between black and white servicemen exploded in July 1971 in a series of race riots in Camp Humphreys, located in the town of Anjongni in P'yongt'aek. Fifty black servicemen entered five Korean bars and demolished them in protest against Korean clubs that discriminated against black soldiers. A Korean mob of over 1,000 people sought to beat the black servicemen, and a race riot ensued (Moon 74). Congressman Ronald Dellums, himself an African-American, accused the Korean government and people of mistreating black servicemen. Dellums supported pulling U.S. troops out of Korea, stating that they did not need to be where they were not wanted.

In order to entice the American military to continue to stay on the Korean peninsula, the South Korean government initiated the Camptown Clean-up Campaign (1971-1976). This campaign had two major goals: the first was to regulate and control the spread of venereal diseases among *kijich'on* women, and the second was to press for behavioral and policy changes regarding discrimination against black military personnel.[14] This included educating Korean club owners and employees as well as white American soldiers about racial discrimination. Club owners were also encouraged to post signs that read: "Serve All Customers Equally," and "Don't Discriminate—Participate." As part of this effort to alleviate racial tensions in camptowns, the women too were instructed to treat all soldiers equally. One flyer passed out to women in It'aewon clubs notes:

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[13] The 24th Infantry Regiment was a segregated unit comprised of all African American enlisted soldiers. Over 600,000 African Americans served in the Korean War.

> In order to keep your business and help the security of your country, you are asked to join with us and help us solve the problem. You are urged to treat all U.S. customers equally. All must be seated and served with equal courtesy and speed, for example. Do not side with any particular group of customers who come to your club, bar, or store. (Moon 89)

Since *kijich'on* women had the most contact with American soldiers, they were seen as the main provokers of racial unrest in the clubs as well as the ones who could best facilitate racial unity and peace. *Kijich'on* women were marked as "white" or "black" depending on the race of the men they mainly associated with. Ascribing to a belief in white superiority, many *kijich'on* women still preferred to associate with white soldiers. Women who associated with white soldiers were considered to be of a "higher class" than those who slept with black soldiers, and it was common for women to be segregated geographically depending on the race of the men they slept with. There were separate bars that catered to white and black soldiers, and women also resided in different residences if they slept with black soldiers. There were economic reasons for this as well. There were more white soldiers in Korea and hence more clubs catering to white soldiers. If a woman mingled with a black soldier, she would be excluding herself from future business with the more numerous white clientele.

In Keller's novel, Sookie's mother has "her hair permed, to be more like the darkies at the club where she worked" (17). As a dark-skinned bi-racial woman, Sookie also finds it more lucrative to work in clubs catering to African-American soldiers. As an African-American bi-racial man, Lobetto is limited to pimping in the black sections of America Town. However, he arranges for three white GIs to have sex with Hyun Jin. In doing so, Lobetto was "poaching outside of his territory. He was trespassing, crossing over to the white sections of America Town" (Keller 150). As her pimp, he warns Hyun Jin not to "mess this up. This could be the start of something rich. It's a new market these white *miguks* wanting to try something from the other side" (Keller 152). The characters in Keller's novel all display some understanding of racial hierarchy and segregation.

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[14] For more on the Camptown Clean-Up Campaign, refer to Katherine Moon's *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*.

The American, pre-Civil Rights racist ideology of the 1950s was adopted by Korean culture and fueled Koreans' attitudes about race. However, the Koreans had adopted a black-and-white segregationist ideology without any analysis of American history or of the causes of racism. Thus their racist attitudes did not only apply to American GIs but also to *kijich'on* women and their bi-racial children. Hyun Jin noticed that on the wall of the apartment next to Sookie's someone had scrawled:

> "GOMSHI. SIR NIGGER, GO HOME." And under that, as if in response, another someone had scribbled in English, "FOK YOU. I AM." I thought that it could have been Lobetto; at his new school, he had learned to write English swear words better than anybody (Keller 61).

*Gomshi* is a derogatory Korean term for African-Americans referring to their dark skin. This bit of graffiti is ironic since it combines racial slurs such as "nigger" and "*gomshi*" with the respectful salutation "sir." So while being American earns the African-American GI the courteous title of "sir," his race and skin color is met with hostility and insult. It is also interesting that Hyun Jin thinks Lobetto is the author of the response "FOK YOU. I AM." This would imply that Lobetto embraces his African-American heritage and recognizes that he is spurned by Korean society. In proclaiming "I AM," according to the most likely readings of the passage, Lobetto also recognizes that as the son of an American GI he is entitled to the title of "SIR," and/or is asserting that yes, he will one day "GO HOME" to America.[15]

Although Lobetto and his friends are aware of the racial hierarchy that exists in the rank-and-file of the American military in Korea, and indirectly apply that ideology to their identifications of themselves and others, they are oblivious to the larger civil rights movement that is occurring in the U.S. during the 1960s and 70s. Lobetto proudly reads the letter his African-American father, Sergeant James

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[15] It's also possible he is saying "I am here" (or "I exist," "I too exist"), or "I am staying here, so fok you!"

Robert Williams, sent him:

> "Bobby, I've been trying to find a place for you. My . . . fantasy, illusion, um . . . dream is that there will be a place for us in America. Dr. King—"
>
> "Who is Dr. King?" Chung Woo interrupted.
>
> "Must be talking about the leader in America," Sookie said. "That's what *king* means in English."
>
> I shook my head. "America doesn't have a king," I announced. "Their leader is called president. President Kennedy, for those of you who obviously did not memorize our map of the world assignment."
>
> Young Sik sneered at me. "You think you know everything!"
>
> "Maybe Lobetto meant to say *president* instead of *king*," Sookie offered.
>
> "Shut up, you guys!" Lobetto snarled. "I am reading my father's letter, and it says King, whoever he is, says we are—shit now here's a word I don't know, but I think it means . . . leftovers. Or maybe outcasts. Yeah, may father says we're outcasts in our own land."
>
> "Shit," Chung Woo said, looking from Lobetto to Sookie. "He's talking about us. He's talking about America Town."
>
> Lobetto frowned at the paper in his hand. "I don't know," he said. "My father says that the King was talking to all the Negroes in America, that there were so many *gomshis* in the street listening to him that it was like a living river, 'A river of humanity,' is what he calls it." (Keller 95-96)

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington D.C. A quarter of a million people attended the event. It was the largest gathering of public protesters that Washington D.C. had ever seen. The year and location were both significant since 1963 marked the centennial of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. This speech by King was the crowning jewel in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.[16] The organizers of the march demanded an end to racial segregation in public schools; civil rights legislation that prohibited racial discrimination in employment; a $2 minimum wage for all workers regardless of race; and protection of civil rights leaders from police brutality.

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[16] The march was originally conceived to publicly expose the deplorable condition of blacks in the South. However, King along with other organizing members acquiesced to President John F. Kennedy's concerns that the march was too strident. In the end, the march took on a much more

In the above passage the children in America Town ironically misinterpret Lobetto's father's description of the ghettoization of African Americans in the U.S., taking it to refer to their own plight as outcasts in Korea. Lobetto notes that Sookie, Hyun Jin, and he are "half in one world, half in the other" (Keller 111). As bi-racial children, they are discriminated against; avenues of desirable employment are closed; and they are exiles, "outcasts" here in Korea as well as back "home" (or where is "home" for one who has been "cast out"?) in the U.S.A. The institutionalization of racism against mixed-raced children in Korea was prevalent during the Korean War and is still widespread. To this day, one must be fully Korean to join the military, hold Korean citizenship, get certain kinds of jobs,[17] and own land.

Both Lobetto and Sookie are marked by dark skin and kinky hair. Hyun Jin has a Korean mother and father but learns midway through the novel that she and Sookie share the same birth mother. Also, there is some doubt as to whether Hyun Jin's biological father is her Korean "dad" or an African-American GI. The blue-black birthmark on her face signals this possibility. Sookie and Hyun Jin attempt to mask the darkness of their skin and their birthmarks with the white Pond's cream they steal from Sookie's mother:

> We looked at our faces in the mirror, cataloging our ugliness. My birthmark gleamed, an ebony light, black as Africa. Sookie held up a white jar. "Pond-su cream," she said to my face in the mirror. "Made in the U.S.A." . . .
>
> Sookie rubbed the Pond-su over my birthmark. "To lighten and soften your skin."
>
> I held my breath and as she rubbed, I thought I could see my stained skin dissolving under the layer of white cream.
>
> "Look," Sookie breathed. "You are almost beautiful."
>
> Our eyes met in the glass. We looked from my face to Sookie's.

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mild tone advocating for racial harmony. Malcom X who advocated a more direct approach called the march, the "farce on Washington."

[17] According to the Korean Constitution, certain rights which foreigners do not have Korea are the right to work for the mining industry (Article 6), the right to work in wire broadcasting (Article 4), and the right to build wireless broadcasting (Article 5).

> Sookie lifted her arms. “I don’t think there is enough Pond-su cream in this jar to cover my whole body,” she said, trying to joke away her ugliness.
>
> “Mmmm,” I said, “then you just have to go to America where you can buy all you want.”
>
> Sookie’s reflection lowered its arms, stopped smiling. “Yes,” the mouth said. “That’s what I am going to do.” (Keller 13)

In this scene, the girls try to use the whiteness of the cream to cover up what they see as their own “ugly” faces. Sookie’s “ugliness” is in her dark skin which reveals her African-American background. Hyun Jin even admits that her friend looks like a “black dog” (Keller 6). Hyun Jin is stained with an ugly blue-black mark that covers almost half of her face. In her interview with Lee, Keller notes:

> Because even that birthmark, too, it can be read in many ways, but on just one level, it presents her as an outcast. So even though she doesn't have the low status, she's still an outcast because of her ugliness. And this allows that friendship, they bond over that. But you can also see ugliness as a metaphor for racism or a metaphor for the mixed-blood status of the children in the camptowns. (Lee 161)

Although Hyun Jin comes from a more affluent family, she finds out later in the novel that she and Sookie share the same birthmother, a GI prostitute. Thus, while Hyun Jin begins the novel with a higher class standing, she is condemned to the life of a prostitute once she confirms the identity of her birthmother. Hyun Jin’s blue-black birthmark and Sookie’s dark skin consign them both to a lower class. The physical darkness points to the moral darkness of the camptown system, a darkness which lies at the core of U.S.-Korea relations.

## Conclusion

After World War II and the Korean War, *kijich’on* women played a crucial role in maintaining the political and economic relations between South Korea and the U.S. As ambassadors to America, *kijich’on* women had the heavy burden of allaying the racial tensions between black and white Americans. Yet, ironically enough, these women were also targets of the American soldiers’ racism, for the soldiers saw them as racially and sexually subordinate and thus dispensable. They were also looked down upon by Koreans, who viewed them as dirty *younggalbo* for sleeping with foreigners. Whereas *kijich'on* women were marginalized for associating with foreigners, their bi-racial children were mocked and ostracized for being living reminders of Korea's neocolonial condition, its political, economic and cultural subordination to the U.S.A., a subordination paralleled by these women's sexual subordination.

The interracial intimacies between American servicemen and *kijich'on* women show how the neocolonial relationship between the U.S. and South Korea relies on the economy of gendered and sexualized bodies and discourses. Recently, scholars have become more vocal about analyzing the relationship between the South Korean government, U.S. military forces in Korea, and the presence of camptowns. Public awareness of the camptowns and of the racial tensions that arise from interactions with U.S. military personnel has also increased. On June 13, 2002, two 14-year-old girls were run down and killed by an Armored Vehicle from the 44th Engineer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division. The deaths of these girls outraged the Korean people. A much-heated public debate followed, in which the need for U.S. soldiers on the Korean peninsula was severely questioned. Yet there still has not really been enough attention given to the ethical issue of multi-racials in South Korea.

In 2005, America Town was popularized in the Korean drama *Seul-peun Yeon-ga,* or *Sad Sonata*, directed by Yoo Chul Yong. Distributed by MBC, the drama ran from January through March 2005. It was so successful that a Tagalog-dubbed version was broadcast on the Philippines station QTV-11. In this popular drama, America Town and the plight of *kijich'on* women and their children are romanticized. While two children of *kijich'on* women find their way to success and love in America, the issue of multi-racial children is unfortunately never touched upon.

It has been over 50 years since the first camptown opened to cater to American forces stationed in South Korea. As a result of this long history, the number of bi-racial or mixed-race children on the peninsula has increased. According to the Pearl S. Buck Foundation, which works on behalf of multiracial children, this number is quickly rising. Although this growth in the number of multiracial children in South Korea is or will be the result of many other factors, including the recent surge of foreign brides and foreign workers coming into Korea, it is still true that over five decades of camptowns and interracial intimacies remain a large part of the equation.

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