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Published online: 05 May 2018.

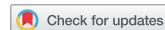Submit your article to this journal ↗

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Global Identifications: The Social Identity Behind the Globalised Sociocultural Anthropologist

Alex Jong-Seok Lee*

My social identity as a diasporic Korean American male sometimes engendered doubts about my competency as a cultural anthropologist of South Korea. Such ethnonational gatekeeping by my 'native' Korean colleagues laid bare broader critiques of 'the West'. Paradoxically, they also prompted re-entrenchments of nativeness (and implicitly, non-nativeness) by my colleagues despite their increasingly 'non-native' transnational identities. These embodied cultural boundaries are less visible (and arguably less consequential) to those viewed as recognisably non-native Asian (for example, white, Euro-American) or native Asian. But they are markedly visible and relevant to diasporic subjects who fit less comfortably within both boundary-enforcing classifications. The figure of the diasporic anthropologist reveals presumed racialised and gendered markers of difference—chiefly the unmarked but organising role of whiteness— conveniently subsumed under categories of 'the West' and 'Asia'. Consequently, recent calls for 'global anthropology' against 'Euro-American academic hegemony' that fail to address this essentialising tendency, although important, remain inadequate.

Keywords: Global Anthropology; Reflexive Ethnography; Diasporic Identity; Race; Whiteness; Asian American Studies; Asian Studies; Korean Studies; Knowledge Production

Introduction

20 April 2008. Seoul Metropolitan Subway Line One, Guro-gu, Seoul, South Korea. Noon.

I was nervous. For the past year I had been working as a volunteer, later paid 'program officer' at an 'Asia'-regional, Seoul-based non-governmental organisation (NGO).[1]

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With the support and guidance of its then director, Mr Park, a middle-aged Korean activist scholar who had obtained his PhD in England, I was organising South Korea's first 'inter-Asia' conference on 'Race and Racism in Asia'.[2] Together, we were on a packed subway train heading downtown to solicit funds from Mr Fischer, the head of a German funding agency. Out of the blue, Mr Park whispered in my ear, 'Don't be too American when we meet Mr Fischer. Make sure to tone down your Americanness during our meeting'.[3] I could not decide if I was more puzzled or hurt. Until then, my proximity as a Korean American to 'native' Koreans like Mr Park in South Korea appeared mostly positive. It usually facilitated rapport; Mr Park had warmly welcomed me into his NGO despite my being just another (over)-privileged (Korean) American English teacher in Asia. In quieter moments he even shared more intimate thoughts. For example, he sometimes expressed his suspicion of visiting 'Western' (*oegugin*, that is, Euro-American, henceforth 'white') academics who 'always' presumed to know more about and received greater credit for their 'expertise' of South Korea than the putative natives.[4] At the same time, that I felt somehow complicit in such Western hegemony in South Korea added to my sensitivity of how Western I appeared to Mr Park, as well as other Korean 'locals' like him. Conversely, in the US, as a marginalised racial minority, I was keenly aware of how 'Asian', and therefore foreign, I presented myself in (non-Asian) American spaces. In both cultural contexts, fitting in was my goal. Mr Park's comment made it clear, however, that whether real or performed, my social identity almost anywhere made me stick out. We continued riding toward our destination. Ultimately, Mr Fischer and his organisation granted us funding, and the conference was a resounding success. But too shy to ask Mr Park to clarify what he meant by his comment, I could only speculate.[5]

In South Korea (my nostalgic home) and the US (my natal home) my national identity was scarcely considered 'real'.[6] In South Korea, my Koreanness was contingent, at the mercy of mood, as demonstrated by Mr Park's flippant disdain for my ambiguous Americanness.[7] In the US, despite having been born in Houston, Texas, I was often not considered American (that is, white) enough. Indeed, on occasion, Americans still assume I am a foreigner.[8] The stakes of this transnational reversal became most explicit when, before attending graduate school, I worked within a Korean English language market notorious for its overt stratification of labour along lines of whiteness, race, nationality, gender and age (Ruecker 2011; Ruecker & Ives 2015). For example, to most South Korea-based English language schools, I was a *kyop'o* (literally, 'overseas Korean') whose in-between national status justified lower pay or denial of employment compared to a 'native English speaker' (colloquially, a white Westerner). Upon entering graduate school, I was unsure about how these dynamics might play out within a context (academia) and discipline (anthropology) distinguished by histories of internal introspection and critique. The analysis that follows is what I discovered.

Jane Ferguson astutely observes how '[p]henotype and presumed linguistic and cultural facility [both among researchers and the researched] are sometimes seen as a fast track to ethnographic intimacy' (Introduction, this issue). Above all, although diasporic anthropologists share similar phenotypical affiliations with their so-called native

interlocutors, the former must still negotiate with the competing expertise of native scholars. In my case, the symbolic baggage of my sometimes being 'too American' and 'not Korean enough', generated 'myriad surprise fees' (Introduction, this issue). Specifically, my competency as a Korean American anthropologist of South Korea among some of my Korean-born academic colleagues, more so than among my Korean-born field interlocutors, was interrogated. Such ethnographic intimacy with the former made me privy to broader, unspoken conceptions and critiques of the West by supposed native anthropologists, as well as ongoing negotiations of the latter's own increasingly fluid, transnational identities. Accordingly, this article argues that the figure of the diasporic Korean anthropologist, who simultaneously invokes and rejects logics of ethnonationality within the concept of the West and Asia, evinces limitations behind more auspicious accounts of globalising anthropologies.[9]

Recent talk of 'global anthropologies' has argued for levelling the knowledge production playing field between 'the West' and Asia.[10] But most do not address ongoing racialised and territorialised assumptions—chiefly, the unmarked organising role of whiteness (Dyer 1997)—within these bounded categories. In so doing, these studies, although valuable, inadvertently simplify notions of an identifiable (white) West/Westerner and ethnonational (native) Asia/Asian. The social identity of the diasporic anthropologist embodies the contradictions of these under-theorised classifications. Building on literature on reflexive ethnography, critical ethnic studies and Korean Studies, this article examines the role of my 'non-native' Korean American diasporic identity vis-à-vis those of so-called native Korean (henceforth 'Korean-born') and non-native, non-diasporic (that is, white) identities within broader debates about ethnographic fieldwork and theory.[11] Methodologically, this research draws on my reflections as a Korean American living and working in Seoul, South Korea (2005–9), a student of the late Professor Nancy Abelmann at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC) (2009–16) and an ethnographer in Seoul, South Korea (2014–15).

Writing Against the West … But Whose West?

Debates about reflexivity and the politics of positionality have persisted since anthropology's 'reflexive turn'. For example, Haraway (1988, 577) famously wrote about 'situated knowledges' or how '[a]ll knowledge [was] a condensed node in an agonistic power field'. Similarly, Rosaldo (1993, 2) asserted an anthropologist's (privileged) 'subject position' within a field of social relations fundamentally shaped truth claims. Accordingly, each social analyst occupied a 'position' or 'structural location' from which they observed. By the mid-1990s, Scheper-Hughes (1995, 417–418) articulated a growing fear that anthropological observation was a hostile act that reduced its 'subjects' to mere 'objects' of anthropologists' 'discriminating, incriminating, scientific gaze'. Anthropology had to 'locate and train indigenous local anthropologists' to help redefine and transform the vexed discipline, she wrote.

More recently, Kuwayama (2003, 8) has pushed for the 'dialogic cooperation' of native interlocutors to challenge the West. In a more hopeful vein, Mathews (2015, 364) writes about 'a greater awareness in the United States and Western Europe that anthropology is not only a Euro-American endeavor but also a global endeavor'. Nevertheless, Mathews (2016, 845) notes, an imbalance still exists between the West and other 'global' anthropologies of the world, namely those from Asia. These works admirably promote the political project of a more egalitarian anthropology of the future. Consequently, this article aims to question the terms rather than political aims of such scholarship.

The West often refers to the world system of academia (Tamanoi 2005) wherein the West, namely the US, United Kingdom, Australia and France, still reign in producing, disseminating and consuming anthropological knowledge. Therefore, in challenging what he views as a hegemonic force to counter, Kuwayama (2003) employs a form of strategic essentialism (Spivak 1990) that foregrounds the shared subjugation of the Japanese academy to Western scholarly dominance. That Kuwayama's notion of Japaneseness coheres only insofar as there is an accompanying notion of shared (and thus, bounded) biological, cultural and national identity goes without saying. Kuwayama (2003, 64, 9) deems himself an authentic (that is, native) Japanese, long the object of inauthentic representation fighting from the 'periphery of the academic world system'.

Commendably, Mathews (2016) adopts a similar political stance to that of Kuwayama but does so by challenging the notion of national identity based on immutable and permanent shared bodily 'substance' (Carsten 2004, 109), culture or territory. To do so, Mathews introduces his own ambivalent identity as 'an American by birth and an American anthropologist by training' (846). Although having attended graduate school in the United States, as of 2016, he had taught in Hong Kong for twenty-three years and, before that, around eight years in Japan. Consequently, as a self-described 'American Anthropologist in East Asia as Gatekeeper/Interpreter', Mathews describes himself as being 'in an ambiguous position' with 'no idea anymore where [his] home is between Hong Kong, Japan, and the United States' (846).

Laudably, other scholars have tried to connect and complicate the seeming divide between Western and Asian knowledge production. For example, in their edited anthology, *Dismantling the East–West Dichotomy*, editors Hendry and Wong (2006, 141) discuss the political flexibility of the East–West binary within the context of Japan. On the one hand, it is 'destructive' by flattening internal conflicts and contradictions. On the other hand, not unlike the case of Asian Americans championing a pan-ethnic approach in the US for political ends, the East–West dichotomy also can be used by certain Asian-born ethnic groups to 'dismantle regional nationalisms' (125). Inherent in the East–West theoretical trope is the notion of an easily demarcated division between an East (Asia) and West (North America, Western Europe and Australia).

Although sometimes employing a problematic liberal multiculturalist approach, many studies like those noted above still effectively address modes of unequal

power between knowledge production in the West and Asia: the uneven stratification of global English language markets, uneven histories of development and economic backing and differing cultural expectations over education and the role of the social sciences. Yet, many also inadvertently maintain essentialising categories by precluding a critical discussion of race and whiteness within these processes. As such, criticisms against Western academic hegemony vis-à-vis Asia are insufficient.[12] That most native Asians, including scholars, continue to conflate the category of the West and Westernness with a kind of unified whiteness or 'pan-white ethnic supremacy' (Jacobson 1999) is a salient example. Doing so minimises the historical role, including within anthropology, of whiteness in helping to structure power relations, including those between Western and Asian academic traditions.

Contrasting Colours of the West in South Korea

The strong propensity among many Koreans to maintain a fixed notion of Koreanness (and implicit nativeness) should be understood as a historical production of postcolonial cultural identity (Abelmann & Lie 1997). The notion of a Korean national identity unsullied by external forces and based on ethnic and national homogeneity (ethnonationality) emerged out of a myriad of twentieth-century historical processes, such as Japanese colonialism, pan-Asianism and international communism (Shin 2006). Within this framework, what constitutes a sense of (racially) bounded, native Koreanness should be understood as a historically rooted, nationalistic response to foreign encroachment—previously Japanese colonialism and currently US imperialism. Even so, questioning the 'eternal and natural essence of Korean ethnic unity' still appears 'politically incorrect' among Koreans (Shin 2006, 3). Kim (2008, 23) argues that South Korean society's notion of ethnonational identity (that is, being of the same 'blood' origins), 'not pan-nationality (American "race"), is the key unit of Korean racial understanding'. In other words, the seemingly non-raced category of 'Korean' itself can be understood in racial terms.[13]

Ambivalence over the national category of the diasporic Korean American as neither fully Western (that is, white) nor Asian (for example, native Korean) bears this point out. Consequently, defining what is Korean (and by proxy, Asian) remains contentious. Yet the West still emerges as a relatively homogeneous figure of begrudging respect or quiet contempt. In 2007, South Korea-based sociologist Kyung-Man Kim and political scientist Jung-In Kang illustrated the contours of this debate in the news article, 'Whose Responsibility is Korean Sociology's Compatibility with the West?'[14] Kim laments how 'Western-centric' theory, as well as the failures of the Korean education system, forces most Korean scholars to work even harder in the global higher education economy. He suggests more native Korean scholars study harder, produce more scholarship in English and even allow more 'foreign' scholars to participate in Korean research. Referencing the limited reach of South Korea-based scholarship outside a domestic market, Kim concludes with a quasi-ethnonationalist call for all Korean intellectuals to spread Korean scholarship.

Kang shares Kim's concerns over so-called Western-centrism in the global academy. For him, following 'global' academic trends (primarily those forged by the West) is important. But more crucial is respecting 'Indigenous' knowledge forms in South Korea. Contributing to the world's scholarly expertise means learning more, not less, about South Korea, especially the latter's unique philosophical traditions. Kang compares this approach to that of Korean athletes groomed under a Korean system who later are exported to US American sports teams.

Kim's and Kang's insights are valuable and, as an outsider, I acknowledge that I have much to learn. Nevertheless, the idea of a discrete West posed by the two scholars as an academic foil to an autonomous South Korea, is made more hegemonic by the latter's homogenising descriptions. Globalisation in both regions notwithstanding, both scholars appear as assured in the bounded legibility of South Korea and Koreanness as they are about that of the West and Westernness. But neither clarifies the components and contradictions of these slippery binary categories. Anthropologist Hyang Jin Jung provides instructive contextualisation to this analytical tendency among certain South Korean scholars. In an interview with the *American Anthropologist* she describes the foreign yet familiar quality most Koreans feel towards its long-term geopolitical ally:

> To the Korean public, the US appears too familiar and too distant at the same time to inspire, say, an anthropological romance. It is too familiar through Hollywood and the market. American pop music and Hollywood movies have long been part of 'modern' life in Korea. Now Starbucks is on every corner, and the obsession with the English language (especially American English, but in addition to the US, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Singapore, and Philippines are frequent destinations for middle-class Koreans studying English abroad) is gripping the whole country. The political and military alliance between South Korea and the US is another factor that makes the US too familiar to the Korean public. However, it is too distant for those of us living on the Korean peninsula, whose immediate regional concerns are mainly in Northeast Asia. The result is that American popular culture and American politics are popular topics and mundane concerns among South Koreans, but American culture—culture as a way of life in a classic anthropological sense—doesn't seem to have a place in people's imaginations. (Dominguez & Metzner 2016, 839)

Another reason most Koreans may hold such an uncertain image of the US, Jung says, might be because of the latter's status 'more as a force than a place where actual people live their lives in their own cultural world, a force that seems to force the rest of the world to become like America': 'The US has historically been where the anthropologist comes from, not goes to' (839). Nevertheless, as Dirlik (1994, 350) asserts, globalisation and the transnationalisation of production have neither signalled the 'end of Eurocentrism' nor offered a markedly different alternative. As a case in point, at times, as a diasporic Korean American, I am included as a Westerner, as evident in the earlier example with Mr Park. At other times, however, the fragility of this 'natural' association was thrown into sharp relief, not only in a US (and by extension a West) that historically has deemed Asians as 'forever foreign', but also in a globalising South Korea noticeable in its hierarchies of racial/national othering.

Yet, as I explain below, a few of my fellow UIUC Korean-born academics expressed disinterest in these points. For them, the 'scattered hegemony' (Grewal & Kaplan 1994) of Western privilege held little relevance within South Korea's ivory tower politics. What colour Western privilege looked like mattered less than its almost unquestioned dominance in Asia. At first, this indifference was difficult to accept. Like other people of colour in the US, Korean Americans' Western privilege is contingent. Kim (2008, 165) clarifies as follows: '[p]artial presence in the home country coupled with invisibility in the United States and the world is … heartbreaking for many Korean immigrants, whose overriding ambition has been to gain recognition as "equals" of America/the White West'. In addition to its psychological effects, this difficulty also translates into concrete effects like a 'bamboo ceiling' for Asian Americans seeking professional advancement in the US, including within the academy (Flaherty 2017). Regardless, to my US-based, Korean-born critics, my status as a Korean American was one and the same with their monolithic image of a privileged Western academic.

Intimacies and Imperialisms of a Different Colour

Professor Nancy Abelmann was my dissertation advisor and I am honoured to have been one of her graduate students. As such, at UIUC I was surrounded by an interdisciplinary array of talented Korean-born scholars—most of whom hailed from the most prestigious universities in South Korea. All served as generous sources of local knowledge, expertise and friendship. From the outside, it might have appeared that my built-in 'Koreanness'—passable yet never complete—would facilitate my smooth welcome into the supposed native fold. For example, in terms of familiarity with subtle cues of etiquette, particularly linguistic ones like Korean honorifics and politeness in conversational Korean, I was well-trained. A lifetime of cultural policing from my Korean immigrant parents instilled in me a sensitivity—or more accurately, shame (Lo & Fung 2011)—over whether I exhibited enough 'Korean' cultural fluency under a Korean-born gaze. As such, despite my American upbringing, my status as a second-generation, Korean heritage speaker still granted me provisional access to an 'imagined Korean (collegial) ethnic community' (Shin 2006, 188; Anderson 1991) that defied geographic or cultural barriers.

Yet despite, or perhaps because of, this genuine intimacy, critiques over my social identity's ambiguous positionality sporadically surfaced.[15] At first, experiencing such charges felt ironic. Each passing year that the few Korean-born UIUC academics who made these claims lived and studied in the US, the ostensible nativeness of their Korean identities diminished. At the least, they were already transnational. At most, they were forever becoming transnational *and* diasporic—like me. But purely native Korean (an endlessly dubious distinction a few maintained) they were not. To his credit, a Korean-born male colleague, Kibum, seemed to agree. A graduate of one of South Korea's most elite universities, Kibum was a twenty- to thirty-something Korean-born scholar pursuing his PhD in the US. Within academic circles *in* South Korea, he observed, there was a discourse, albeit muted, about a hierarchy of

'Westernised' Koreanness. The stakes seemed most apparent when talking about prestige and power within South Korea's cutthroat ivory tower, itself historically moulded by the postcolonial influences of Japan and the US (Yonezawa et al. 2014). According to Kibum, scholars who had received their PhDs in the West, chiefly but not exclusively in the US, were preferred. Personal conversations with several South Korea-based Korean American professors, recent scholarship (Froese 2012; Kim 2016b) and a review of most academic departments in South Korea (including anthropology) seem to support this contention. A plurality of Korean faculty across disciplines possess degrees from elite, primarily US, institutions of higher education.

Hence, in theory, Korean-born but US-based scholars like Kibum were also gaining a critical cultural capital edge over 'more native' South Korea-based scholars either uninterested in or unable to receive their degrees in the West. The former accumulated this advantage against the backdrop of neoliberalising universities around the world. Internal(ised) logics of Korean academic prestige that increasingly equated proximity to Westernness as a desirable cosmopolitan strategy to enhance one's moral and marketable sense of worth were another important factor (Chun & Han 2015; Lo et al. 2015; Kim 2017). In this respect, in comparison to other transnational Korean migrants—variously referenced in Korean Studies scholarship as (early) 'study abroad students' (Lo et al. 2015), 'education migrants' (Park & Bae 2009) and/or 'working holiday makers' (Yoon 2014)—Korean-born scholars like Kibum arguably inhabited the 'higher end' of transnational upward mobility strategies in South Korea. In other words, as academics studying at a prominent US-based public university, my Korean-born colleagues still held substantial material and symbolic capital in South Korea. Curiously, Kibum deemed this point inconsequential. Obtaining *any* academic job in South Korea as a Korean-born academic, Western-trained or not, was more difficult, Kibum maintained. This point was exacerbated by recent competition from more recognisable Westerners (both white American and Korean American) supposedly infiltrating the Korean academic market.[16] Consequently, most Korean university hiring committees would rank significantly higher *any* English-written paper accepted by a 'third-tier' American Science Citation Index (SCI) journal over a 'superior' Korean-written Korea Citation Index (KCI) paper (personal communication, 1 November 2016). At the same time, according to a prominent Seoul-based professor (personal communication, 9 October 2017), these practices may be more nuanced. For example, depending on the job position, there are different considerations at play, including different hiring lines, (non-Korean-born) 'diversity hires' and an ongoing preference for graduates of South Korea's three most elite universities (that is, 'SKY': Seoul National University, Korea University and Yonsei University) (Kim 2016a).

Without a doubt, South Korea's contemporary job market increasingly values specifications (*sŭp'ek*) (Cho 2015) with an increasingly Western flavour: elite (preferably Western) academic credentials, work and life experience abroad and English language skills. Arguably, the greatest privilege diasporic Korean Americans like myself possess is what Yano (2011, 119) deems 'proximal prestige', or the rare opportunity to 'learn,

borrow, and imitate—as well as reject—racial and class performances that seemed to spell prestige', namely 'proximity to white [Western] culture'. In this respect, I agree and empathise with Kibum's complaint. Several other Korean-born academic friends at UIUC lamented about feeling structurally forced to pursue their PhDs in the US (rather than in South Korea) to secure the uncertain possibility of academic employment 'back home'. Adding insult to injury, following Kibum's reasoning, 'less qualified' Westerners (including myself) still could 'outrank' Korean-born scholars like him in his own 'home' country.

At times, the fuzziness of the Western label generated a decidedly unforgiving reaction. 'You're an imperialist! All the other [native] Koreans say so, don't you know this?' another Korean-born male scholar once told me. Also an undergraduate alumnus of an elite university in South Korea, Jae-hyun was a twenty- to thirty-something Koreanist pursuing his PhD in the US. What was supposed to have been a pleasant dinner together escalated into a heated debate over claims to cultural authority. At first glance, the topic felt harmless. I was explaining how while living in South Korea prior to attending graduate school, I had tried to visit North Korea. Early in the process, however, my visa application to the famously reclusive country was rejected with no explanation. Frustrated by the lack of response from an intermediary tourist agency, I surmised it might have had something to do with my being an American of Korean descent. During my four years living in South Korea, I had heard many other Americans, primarily white, recount stories of visiting the Democratic People's Republic of Korea with relative ease. In contrast, my being summarily rejected as a non-white, ethnic American felt unfair. At the time, the rejection felt like another subtle indication of the privilege—read as 'real' (that is, white)—that Americans benefited from, even in my Korean 'homeland'. Surprisingly, my academic associate reacted with force. There I was again, Jae-hyun objected, 'imposing' my predictably Western bias (in this case, an over-emphasis on race) on what was commonsensical to any Korean-born scholar like himself. White Americans were more commonly accepted to visit North Korea not because of any sort of racial privilege, he stressed. Any American was free to enter the reclusive country, regardless of ethnic or racial background. Instead, North Korea happened to have a justifiable sensitivity towards Americans of ethnic Korean origin. Historically, Korean Americans had played a role in espionage and missionary activities. More importantly, in comparison, I was lucky; Korean-born nationals like himself, he emphasised, were barred from visiting the country altogether.

In retrospect, Jae-hyun had a point. Very possibly, I *was* imposing a US-centric perspective out of tune with richer, more locally informed ones like his. On a more visceral level to Jae-hyun, my overly casual tone probably resembled the same stereotypical image of overprivileged Westerners bragging about playing tourist in a region as geopolitically and emotionally fraught as North Korea. From this perspective, Jae-hyun's indignation made sense. Nevertheless, regarding his academic accusation, even if I was being US-centric, then were not all anthropologists (albeit to different degrees in different contexts) 'guilty' of the same sin of imposing 'outside' views? Would this

not also include my relatively elite, transnational, Korean-born accuser? Ironically, prior to this episode, Jae-hyun and I had sometimes joked about *other* visiting Western scholars who had appeared overly confident and less deferential about their (outsider) expertise of South Korea. These scholars were usually familiar (albeit stereotypical) figures of the 'imperial' West: white men. In this intense exchange, though, I became the oppressor. Upon reflection, Jae-hyun's accusation seemed to index a larger injustice. Like Kibum, Jae-hyun described the difficult transition from representing South Korea's academic elite to 'feeling invisible' in a mostly white American campus. His experiences as an English-language struggling, international Asian student paralleled longstanding stereotypes of Asian Americans as foreign, inscrutable and passive. But as our dramatic dispute revealed, important perceived power differentials between us forestall simple appeals to co-ethnonational solidarity.

Gendered Intimacies and Imperialisms

After a period of choosing topics as wide-ranging as international students in South Korea to Korean masculinity abroad, I remembered earlier stories of a Korean uncle having spent years in Saudi Arabia as a construction worker. In the summer of 2012, I found myself in Dubai in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), among mostly male Korean office workers dispatched from Korean conglomerates like Samsung and Hyundai. As time wore on, however, the experiences of similarly young, mostly female Korean Emirates Airlines flight attendants in the area caught my attention. Most described having been unexceptional back home (humble academic and economic backgrounds) and understandably surprised by the dramatic class and lifestyle shift generated by their transnational paths. Yet these transitions also were confusing. In the face of labour traditionally devalued across the globe—'low skilled' service work —these hyperfeminised, glamourised, globetrotting women could transcend (albeit never fully) the more conventional classed and racialised stigma of other Asian 'labour migrants' in the Arab Gulf.

On paper, my life and those of my interlocutors could not have been more different. I was a man; most of them were women. I was born in the US; most of them were born in South Korea. English was my native language (although I had struggled to learn my 'heritage' language since I was a child). I was a PhD student; most of them had either just graduated from university or had been working in unstable, part-time jobs for only a few years. Yet, like all relationships between anthropologists and their multifarious interlocutors, there were interesting commonalities. As a Korean American man raised by devout Buddhists in the (ostensibly) racially homogenous and politically conservative bastion of Orange County, California, I had always felt different—both from the white American mainstream and the Korean American minority community.[17] Consequently, like my interlocutors, from an early age I also possessed a desire to escape the stifling confines of home. Of course, my path towards graduate studies was greatly enhanced by the privilege of my having been born in the US with its greater opportunities. Like my flight attendant interlocutors, however, my

academic background was good but not elite. Among Koreans (both diasporic and native), a morally charged public discourse of 'loser' (*rujŏ*) disparages Koreans who do not win acceptance to elite 'SKY' universities in South Korea (Kim 2017). As a diasporic Korean who 'failed' to get into a comparable university in the US (for example, the Ivy League), I could also relate to my research subjects' sense of emotional and professional precarity. Finally, my academic and political interests in labour were further cultivated after years of working as a labour union organiser immediately after graduating from university.

As Cho (2012) reminds us, the subjectivity of Korean American men in South Korea remains controversial. Although at times stereotypical, his description of a specific subset of gendered transnational labourers in Asia—specifically, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Korean American male English teachers—can be applied to other Korean American men working in Asia, including academics like myself. According to Cho, Korean American male English teachers are met by native Koreans with a combination of praise, suspicion and pity due to the former's concomitant labelling as bilingual global citizens, hypersexual predators and failed immigrants. Recent ugly cases of (male Korean) Americans 'recovering' their masculinity in South Korea, such as boasting about 'sexual conquests' with local Korean women, after decades of racialised emasculation in the West—what Eng (2001) dubs 'racial castration'—exemplify this sordid image.

Scholars like Moon (1997) and Lee (2010), however, provide greater geopolitical nuance to these gendered formations. Moon and Lee contend a neo-imperial world order that juxtaposes a 'masculine' post-Japanese colonial [white] US saviour with a 'feminised' post-Korean War Korean victim which continues to signify everyday bodies and interactions of modern-day Korean life. Unquestionably, Korean American men like myself benefit from existing patriarchal structures over Korean American women in the US and over Korean-born women *and men* in South Korea. But as I have tried to demonstrate throughout this article, conflating the social identities and accompanying privileges of Korean American men with those of Korean-born men elides more than it enlightens. Chiefly, it selectively restricts the meaning of Koreanness (here, Korean masculinity) while reifying the notion of a bounded (ethnonational) East in contradistinction from a recognisable (white) West. Hence, equating Korean American male privilege with that of Korean-born male privilege overlooks the effects of white Western masculinity on both groups (Kim 2006).

In another incident at UIUC, a Korean-born female academic, Mina, made it clear that my status as a 'non-native' anthropologist rendered my expertise worryingly deficient. Similar to Kibum and Jae-hyun, Mina also was a graduate of one of South Korea's top universities, then in her twenties or thirties pursuing a PhD in the US. During a conversation, she asked me bluntly, 'What is your dissertation's argument?' As a (quiet) feminist, I told her I was troubled by the hypergendered image of the flight attendant job in Asia, particularly its rigid projection of idealised femininity and muted masculinity. Conversely, following anthropology's aim at holistic understandings, I refrained from making facile judgements. Through my research, my

interlocutors kept telling me how they saw the job as one of the few attractive and sustainable paths for young women unfairly circumscribed by structural conditions like institutional sexism, enduring classism and record youth unemployment. But after staying solemn, Mina broke her silence: 'You really must learn more about Korean society and history. I'm worried about you'. With genuine concern (and subtle condescension), Mina said that my opinion reeked of shallowness. She suggested that there was little agency on the part of these women; the job was further proof of South Korea's stubborn patriarchy. 'As a native feminist', she stressed, it was easy for her to see this shortcoming. 'As a friend', Mina insisted that I read more local Korean language scholarship. My 'shallow' scholarly understanding of South Korea (particularly regarding gender relations), she suggested, put me at risk of public embarrassment among other Korean-born scholars.

In the moment, I felt compelled to defend my position and complicate Mina's iron-clad belief in her own nativeness vis-à-vis her Korean-born research subjects. Most of Mina's interlocutors were South Korea-based in contrast to her status as a US-based, transnational graduate student, the latter a mark of relative privilege. Moreover, unlike most Koreans, Mina was a member of South Korea's academic elite. Undeterred, Mina reiterated that these were minor points; her greater grasp of Korean culture remained intact. My patience tested, I presented a topic seldom, if ever, mentioned. I asked about our renowned, white American advisor. 'Nancy isn't a native Korean either, so shouldn't we also criticise her cultural expertise?' Steadfast, Mina responded by bringing up our advisor's pioneering work in South Korea, how the latter had earned her cultural stripes among the country's most progressive and feminist groups. More importantly, according to Mina, Professor Abelmann had always possessed enough intellectual integrity to proactively seek out Korean-born scholars to vet any developing project. By this account, our mentor was more native Korean than I was.

Not unlike Kibum's and Jae-hyun's criticisms earlier, I could accept certain elements of Mina's critique. I knew I was not an 'insider'. Moreover, someone like Mina, a Korean-born woman, did hold a unique vantage point that I did not. As a result, on the one hand, I felt lucky to be privy to such insider knowledge. On the other hand, such intimate access also produced the opposite effect. Rather than becoming more confident in my knowledge of 'locally informed' Korean anthropology, I had become hindered by personal doubt. While I disagree with some of my Korean-born colleagues' ascriptions of my supposed outsider 'shallowness', I nonetheless agree with their criticisms about non-native Korean (white American and Korean American) privilege in the West and in South Korea. Still, I cannot help but wonder why so many of the Korean-born colleagues who readily complained about the effects of my Korean American privilege seemed to leave the vexed subjectivity of more prominent non-Korean-born, white Western Koreanists like Professor Abelmann (as well as the former's own shifting identities) less examined. While I remain no less loyal to my brilliant late mentor, it seems only reasonable to extend the ethnographic critique. Moreover, Professor Abelmann was always the first to question the 'absolute validity' of her findings, particularly in front of Korean-born audiences. 'Be humble', she often

advised. She always was, and I keep trying to be. But the question remains, what might such anthropological humility look like? And why and for whom should it matter?

Conclusion

Debates over Koreanness in the face of foreignness (particularly Western intellectual hegemony) have endured throughout South Korea's history. Contemporary South Korea has undergone its own 'multicultural' transformation over the years, chiefly with the influx of 'labour migrants' from Southeast Asia and 'professional expatriates' from the West. For the diasporic anthropologist, questions remain: what theoretical, methodological or personal value is there in asserting that diasporic Asians in the West *are* imperial but not in the same way—that they both reproduce and are targets of racialising logics conveniently subsumed within a recognisable (white) 'West' and (ethnonational) 'Asia'?

Ultimately, this article could also be a critical response to my own ongoing academic repositioning. Faced with cultural contexts less receptive to my Korean *and* American experience, I may also be appealing to forms of cultural distinction to critically respond both to Western racism and Korean ethnonational othering. This kind of emotional labour, expressed within the most intimate domains of family and friendship, can 'exert a psychological toll on individuals … and arguably a collective toll on ethnic … and coalitional politics' (Abelmann 2009, 162). At the same time, like all families and friends, conflict often transforms into closeness, and vice versa. In the end, my Korean-born intellectual partners have provided me with intense workshopping sessions, spirited social get-togethers and steadfast emotional support. In so doing, I hope that the unspoken intimacies disclosed in this article encourage reflection rather than resentment. My late mentor rarely discussed her own positionality directly.[18] But it is just as well. Her generous yet critical spirit lives within me, as it does within all her wonderful students. It is something that we all can build on in the future.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]   Like my critique of the concept of 'the West', the concept of 'Asia' tends to concretise more than complicate vastly diverse regions, cultures and people. Like its now-antiquated

counterpart, 'the Far East', uncritical accounts of Asia can reproduce an essentialising Eurocentric worldview (Fields 1981).

[2]   With the exception of my advisor's name, all other names are pseudonyms. I have made all personal information of the latter as unidentifiable as possible.

[3]   Prior to attending graduate school, I was unaware of formal anthropological protocols for conducting fieldwork with human subjects. Therefore, quotes extracted from this earlier ethnographic vignette are paraphrased.

[4]   Except for personal names, all Korean words have followed the conventions of the McCune-Reischauer system of Romanisation. As with most of my conversations with Korean-born scholars, the Korean word *oegugin* was used to signify national or cultural difference. The word's literal definition is 'foreigner' or 'alien'—both of which index an incongruity with an imagined Korean identity as pure and bounded.

[5]   Ironically, despite having been born in South Korea, Mr Park had a thick British accent and spoke 'better' (academic) English than me. He had received his PhD from a second-tier university in the United Kingdom, worked part-time as a lecturer in the UK and later secured a full-time position as director of a modestly funded NGO in Seoul.

[6]   A vast literature (Takaki 1998; Zia 2001) explores this topic, but almost always from the vantage point of diasporic Asians in the US and not in Asia. There are a few exceptions, however (see Kondo 1990; Lee 2009).

[7]   Much of the 'anti-American' critique in South Korea—although sometimes crude—is warranted. Since the end of the Korean War, which partitioned the Korean peninsula into present-day South Korea and North Korea, the US has maintained a hegemonic presence in the former country.

[8]   My definition of whiteness relates to my definition of race, both as meaningful only in their relation to each other. Citing Lipsitz (1999, 1), whiteness is the 'unmarked category against which [global] difference is constructed', one which 'never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organizing principle in social and cultural relations'.

[9]   The diasporic frame has limitations, not least of which is its own tendency to essentialise (and frequently, intensify) a sense of shared rooted ethnic/racial identity. I define ethnonationalism as 'identity with and loyalty to a nation in the sense of a human grouping predicated upon a myth of common ancestry' (Buruma and Margalit 2005, 2).

[10] Defining 'the West' (not unlike defining 'the East') is problematic. Buruma and Margalit (2005) write how the notion of the West is as analytically slippery as describing 'the modern'. In the context of Asia, using the example of Japan during World War II, they describe how the West was known for both its 'positive' and 'negative' vagueness.

[11] Following Parrenas and Siu (2007, 1, 3), diasporic identity in this article references less the binary relationship between homeland and place of settlement than 'an ongoing and contested process of subject formation embedded in a set of cultural and social relations that are sustained simultaneously with the "homeland" (real or imagined), place of residence, and compatriots or co-ethnics dispersed elsewhere'.

[12] As a corollary, challenging Western hegemony in Asia—in its everyday and academic forms—without mentioning race or whiteness is reminiscent of trying to combat sexism without mentioning patriarchy or men.

[13] Admittedly, this is a 'US-centric' proposition to which some scholars might object. Nonetheless, Kim (2008, 23) elaborates how ethnonational Korean identity and its implicit distinguishing between ostensibly native and non-native Koreanness complements US racial ideologies such that Korean Americans (and, I argue, Korean-born Koreans) 'were primed for a sense of inferiority to the White West and for White American dominance' over non-white others.

[14] "Han'guk sahoegwahagŭi sŏgujungshimjuŭi nonjaengt't sŏgangdae kimgyŏngman kyosu VS kangjŏngin kyosu." *Kyŏnghyangshinmun*. Accessed 21 February 2018. http://news.khan.co. kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201506072138305. I thank Jonghyun Park for introducing me to this debate.

[15] My appreciation to Adrienne Lo for making this observation about intimacy.

[16] South Korea-based scholars, including prominent professors, with whom I have spoken have reiterated this point.

[17] Korean American Buddhists are vastly outnumbered by their Christian (Protestant and Catholic) immigrant counterparts.

[18] In her pioneering Asian American Studies scholarship (Abelmann & Lie 1997; Abelmann 2009), however, Professor Abelmann was unequivocal in her nuanced analysis of race, racism and whiteness.

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