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Min-Jung Kim

American Quarterly, Volume 68, Number 2, June 2016, pp. 371-378 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2016.0024>



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Min-Jung Kim

Introduction: American Studies?

American studies at universities in South Korea confronts the challenge of teaching to students in a society plagued by a mania for English-language learning and characterized by deep-rooted problems in its secondary educational system, both of which have reinforced perceptions of the United States as a blissful alternative to local ills and as a privileged identity and desired experience. American studies has a weak base as an academic major in South Korea, one reason, ironically, being the global ascendancy of the English language, for other departments such as English literature and international studies can proffer more intensive concentrations on the language. Reviewing the entrenched ways in which English dominates as cultural and social capital in South Korea illustrates some possible formations of today's students, and in such a context, the transformative potential of university courses, specifically in the literary and cultural registers. Thus, even though it has weak institutional grounds as a stand-alone field, American studies as a critical practice in South Korea can be effected through other channels, such as American literature courses in English departments that can provoke a robust engagement with and relearning of exceptionalist idioms about the United States, which can segue into the progressive energies of the various new developments in American studies scholarship in the United States while moving beyond its topical boundaries and analytical paradigms. Therefore, the present article engages in the disconcerting correlation between English-language obsession and American studies marginality in South Korea, and articulates some of the ways that English literature departments can redirect the pathological social phenomenon of English privilege toward the enabling aims of American studies.

Beyond Instrumentalization

One of the first works to identify a compelling shift in American studies scholarship, Donald Pease's 1990 essay "New Americanists" continues to resonate for students and practitioners in American literary studies searching for alternatives to the narratives of individualism, social mobility, diversity, and manifest destiny through which to read the American experience.¹ Pease foregrounds "a historical context to American Studies," which links the interventions of such scholars as Amy Kaplan, Robyn Wiegman, Lisa Lowe, Winifried Fluck, Paul Giles, George Lipsitz, John Carlos Rowe, Russ Castronovo, and others who provided examples of a critically engaged American studies scholarship through their attention to histories of dispossession, slavery, settler violence, colonialism, imperialism, white supremacy, nativism, and anti-immigration acts. Yet an essay by Bruce Traister, where he quite provocatively assesses some of the problems in/of American studies today, serves as an acute reminder of the ongoing work still remaining for US-based and non-US-based scholars alike. Traister's argument is that the "emancipatory gestures" of the "newest version of Americanist critique remain at least conceptually beholden to one of America's most powerful mythological narratives of national identity: the new nation rising from the ashes of the historical house burned down by the revolutionary arson of the present."² One may disagree, but important here is the separation between academic activity and critical practice that Traister calls out. For instance, he critiques the "new brand of inclusiveness" promoted by the American Studies Association, such as the specific panels on international American studies for scholars based outside the United States. To the extent that "the 'international' exists on the margin of the 'national,' the imagined collapse of those divisions could quite seamlessly reinstall the metropole-province."³

New Americanists or those invested in the so-called transnational approaches are not a coherent body of academics, nor are international scholars from a homogeneous group with regard to language, academic training, institutional positioning, and political affiliation. However, I do acknowledge the problems as characterized by Traister. Whether from our own individual scholarly failings, such as the lack of rigor and theoretical sophistication in research, or from assumptions about the role of international scholars as the voices for a set of issues or perspectives, generally, international scholars often find themselves on special topic panels. All the same, the inclusion of non-US-based representations—regardless of how minimal or merely symbolic—is a meaningful development that can eventually lead to a more critical kind of *inter*-national American studies that needs to be attributed in part to the work of scholars in

the United States who have been directing attention to transnational frameworks or dispossessed identities and histories. Unfortunately, I must admit here that even though definitely not the norm, the individual and personal interactions between US-based and non-US-based scholars—as experienced in international conferences in South Korea—do not necessarily embody the critical energies of American studies to deconstruct existing frameworks and relations, occasionally marked as they are by a sense of entitlement and privilege from the US-based end. At the same time, the vigorous emphasis on *interdisciplinarity* that has been the valued foundation of American studies old and new, furthered by recent approaches in literary and cultural studies, has prompted scholars in South Korea to diversify the contents of our own work, which is ever more important because of the mounting challenges for American studies, particularly as teaching, in Korea.

In 2005 I wrote an essay that examines the different components to and venues for American studies in South Korea.⁴ Very little has changed since. With its sixty-year history and through the annual international conferences, special lecture series, and seminars, the American Studies Association of Korea (ASAK) continues to function as a vibrant site of intellectual exchange for academics in South Korea who work on American literature, culture, and history, and to a lesser extent, in the social sciences. On the other hand, there is an apparent halt in the number of universities with an American studies major or concentration, as the number remains the same if not even decreasing, since some universities are closing doors. As of this year, of the 430 or so four-year universities in South Korea, as in 2005, there are fewer than five universities with American studies as an undergraduate major or concentration, and all, with the exception of the American culture major in the Department of English Language and Literature at Sogang University, Seoul, are housed in the School or Division of International Studies, along with other area studies majors such as China studies and Japan studies and even international trade and international commerce.

A couple of reasons may be responsible for the stunted development of American studies as a major in South Korea: its home currently in regional universities that tend to draw fewer students; a stand-alone major such as literature, history, or politics may be more preferred by students; and English-language training can be obtained through other comparable departments, such as English language and literature or a division of international studies program in Seoul. In addition, while students may enjoy travels to the United States and may be less critical of their own complacency in the face of US cultural influence and imperialist reach, they may be more aware of their self-image

and academic identifications. Given the history of US intervention in South Korea and the ever-circulating yet naturalized discourses about the United States as a military and political-economic superpower around the world, even those interested in the United States as an object of study may opt to realize their pursuits through a separate discipline rather than have to bother with the anxiety of having to justify being a student in “American” studies.

Compared with the undersized American studies and its relatively short history, in almost all the 430 universities in South Korea, English is still the most coveted humanities major because of the rewards of language proficiency. Reflections on how courses in American literature can be a generative force must entail consideration of the formation of today’s students—in particular, their access and relationship to the English language, perceptions or assumptions about the United States specifically and the West more broadly, and knowledge of modern Korean history and American literature and history. South Korea’s fiercely competitive educational system, along with the highest suicide rate among the nations in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, is not news to the world. And, of course, the excessive zeal for English-language learning, or “English Fever,” which, while furnishing some great job opportunities in English teaching for foreigners, has been perceived even by one of the former foreign teachers as an “irrational and abnormal condition.”⁵ In addition to other dismaying manifestations of the zeal for English learning such as English-language kindergartens that cost from one thousand to three thousand dollars a month is the mass exodus of Korean children and students who head to the United States or to comparatively cheaper countries such as New Zealand and Australia or to English-speaking countries in Asia such as the Philippines to learn English for a few years. Since most of the children live abroad with their mothers, their fathers remaining in South Korea to continue with their jobs to finance the children’s education, a distinct term—*kirogi* (wild geese) families (families that get together only once or twice a year)—is now commonly used in South Korea to refer to this new household arrangement.

Despite some tragic outcomes such as serious health issues for fathers living alone and the permanent breakup of families, that one of the parents escorts their willing children abroad indicates the pernicious force of English as cultural and economic capital in South Korea. A better command of English, expected to be achieved through schooling in the United States, can procure higher standardized test scores, which can lead to admission to top-rated colleges. Universities now have admission categories such as “English/Language Proficiency” that are based predominantly on TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, and

TEPS scores, and they also take advantage of the expanding pool of students raised abroad by running English-only programs such as international studies with all-English admissions processes as well. English becomes even more consequential postcollege, dictating job prospects, with companies or public offices requiring standardized test scores regardless of their relevance. The lengthy and impassioned personal reflections of my students, from undergraduate freshmen to those in the PhD program, confirmed that English is a deeply troubling identity that can determine relations, set possibilities, and compromise or guarantee futures.⁶ Students without the experience of living abroad—whose numbers are declining with every entering class—recollect their feelings of resentment because English is a social-class-based issue.

For those blessed enough to have spent time abroad, their time in the United States may be an innocuous, fortuitous escape from the South Korean educational system to learn English. However, economic privilege leads to a potentially dangerous formation that breeds more ignorance. While in the United States, most students live with their mothers, who are there to attend solely to their needs, and these children are thus generally overparented, such that their experiences are limited, occluded from the historical and everyday realities such as racism, bigotry, poverty, and violence. Also formed as they are through high school history classes, these students often return to a South Korea left in the spell of exceptionalist narratives about the United States. Those who have been raised only in South Korea also cultivate their own set of romances, with feelings of missed opportunities.

My intent here is not to suggest that institutional privilege and upbringing are coincident in complicity with power or in the senseless promotion of capitalist relations and values. Students do not tacitly embrace economic globalization and neoliberalism, nor are they oblivious to a host of social problems in South Korea, such as glaring wealth and income discrepancies, exploitation of migrant workers, sexual crimes, domestic violence, and other abuses of power and authority. Incredibly resourceful, focused, and compassionate, students continue to be spokespersons against local and global issues through the effective mobilizations of different vistas such as the social media—often using their English skills for online platforms. At the same time, perhaps overwhelmed by the appalling unemployment rates and competitive job-seeking environments and reminded that life options can be determined by test scores, skills, and transcripts, there is a kind of defeatist pragmatism in today's students.

From the critical aims of an American studies perspective, the goal of American literature classes is quite simple: close reading, historical context, and the mutual consideration of literature and history through interdisciplinarity. As

Winifried Fluck notes, literature can be “a source of historical and cultural insight” and thus the work of “literary studies—this made American studies attractive for many students in English—can claim special relevance for literature, because it promises to provide a key for a ‘deep’ understanding of American society and culture.”⁷ Although even seemingly self-evident, Fluck’s argument serves as a reminder that the particularities of American studies pedagogy can depend on different contexts. To my consternation, during an interview for a government-supported scholarship, a student from a university in Seoul wanted to further study African American literature because of the parallels that could be found between the sufferings of African Americans and South Korean students in a hellish educational system. Here is why close readings do matter, then—for steering clear of dangerous appropriations of victimization, or indiscriminate personalization or universalization of discrete histories and experiences. Close readings that understand literature as representations of what are essentially stories about people should be accompanied by additional inquiries of the underlying references in the literature through investigations of historical or other cultural texts that were produced at the time.

Conclusion: From Difference to Substance

Essentialist labels like an “Asian” or a “Korean” perspective are always naively simple, and tend to be deployed when there really isn’t any substance, but only difference. A particular location does mean an inherent set of readings or views. Being a scholar outside the United States does not automatically grant a noncomplicitous relation to the US state or its histories of empire, dispossession, militarism, and racism.

I want to end by briefly referencing a novel, *The Foreign Student*, by a South Korean American writer, Susan Choi, as a way to consider how to turn difference into substance.⁸ A close reading of Choi’s novel as literature readers—which does not come from any situated knowledge—reveals that the story of a South Korean man’s recollections about the Korean War after his move to the United States can be read as a literalization of trauma, stylistically and thematically. The novel engages in multiply intersecting histories such as Japanese colonialism in Korea, US imperialism in Korea, state violence in Korea, and migration to the United States. But it is how/what this novel by a Korean American writer indexes about South Korea: the government’s masking of the violent histories, repressive measures, and crimes committed against its citizens, and the denial or policing of trauma—not acknowledging the history of atrocities as trauma—and thus why the novel’s stylistics carry

political significance. Here, I also draw on my own knowledge and formation of being a college student in the highly tumultuous 1980s South Korea of the military government's violent, brutal suppression of antigovernment student protest movements that resulted in tortures, deaths, and other measures, such as suspension of schools to thwart mass student gatherings. Though the 1980s are not the backdrop for Choi's novel, it is during this time, experiencing the turmoil on college campuses, that I was able to learn more historical details of mass crimes committed by the South Korean state before and after the Korean War, which I too until then was absolutely unaware of. Other documents such as the horrifying images of the thousands massacred by the Korean government during the time of the Korean War, events that frame Choi's novel, such as the Jeju April 3 Incident (1948), the Suncheon-Yeosu Rebellion (October 1948), and the Daejeon Massacre (July 1950)—that were supported by the US government—are paired with the literature. Students are appalled not just by the images but also by the fact that none of these events have ever been brought to their attention before. In addition, a brief video clip produced in 1950 by the US Armed Forces is shared with the class as a text that serves as an example of the US state's propagation of Cold War discourse (liberation in Korea as a gift of the allied forces and against the threat of communism), especially in the marshaling of humanitarian logic that relies heavily on the imperialist discourse of paternalism. Choi's novel then, by telling of the migration to the United States as the political trajectory of Korea–United States–Korea, that is, not just Korea to United States but the intervention back to Korea, pushes the boundaries of transnational American studies that tend to be focused on the United States as the primary object of study or of Asian American literature that often concentrates on the movement from the point of origin to the United States. Through a South Korean man's harrowing experiences in Korea, as trauma in the United States—that haunts the South Korean dominant national narrative—Choi effectively disentangles any nationally inflected or fixed understanding of identities and histories.

The point is not to claim that texts by minorities present a select set of readings or that there is some indispensably resistant, subversive, or reactionary reading. Students in South Korea, too, cannot be lumped together with regard to their perspectives on English, their historical knowledge, or the level of their understandings and the nature of their experiences with/about the United States. Rather, there may be multiple trajectories for doing American studies, and literature classes that foreground the interdisciplinary pairings of literature and history can be one transforming methodology. Critical modes of reading can compel deconstructive relations, which in the South Korean context may

mean not just a breakdown of the romance with “America” but the imagining of dissonant Americas, as well as a more critical understanding of self and the world. Such, of course, is the disruptive force of all literature, but profoundly more so in a vexed location with a complex web of “glocal” problems.

Notes

Issues addressed in this piece on English language and literary studies in a transnational and transcultural context have been developed through the engaging conversations that I had with other seminar and conference participants of the three-year Ewha Global Top 5 Project “Globalization of Korean Cultural Studies: Convergence Studies Framed in Globalized Critical Discourses,” generously funded by Ewha Womans University. The American Studies Institute at Seoul National University has also provided generous funding for my research on the present state of American studies pedagogy in South Korea and reflections on some alternative, critical venues.

1. Donald E. Pease, “New Americanists: Revisionists Interventions into the Canon,” *boundary 2* 17.1 (1990): 1–37.
2. Bryce Traister, “The Object of Study; or, Are We Being Transnational Yet?,” *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 2.1 (2010): 13.
3. *Ibid.*, 18.
4. Min-Jung Kim, “Language, the University, and American Studies in Korea,” *American Quarterly* 57.2 (2005): 439–62.
5. Robert Price, “The Ill Effects of English Fever,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, January 24, 2013.
6. I thank my students Hyun-Kyung Jo, Setbyul Moon, Eugene Pae, Dasol Choi, Myoungshin Kang, Shin Young Lee, Soo Yeun Lee for their candid sharing of their views and experiences.
7. Winifried Fluck, “American Literary History and the Romance with America,” *American Literary History* 21.1 (2009): 30.
8. Susan Choi, *The Foreign Student* (New York: HarperFlamingo, 1998).