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Dissident Remediation: Minouk Lim and the Postindexical Memory Archive

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Since its codification in the aftermath of World War II, contemporary human rights discourse and related juridical apparatuses have stood on uneasy ground. As interdisciplinary scholars in legal studies, transnational American studies, ethnic studies, and political theory have long argued, human rights—as an articulation of universal natural rights *and* an international governing body—is sutured to the geopolitics of the Cold War. For Randall Williams (2010) and Lisa Yoneyama (2016), the cohering of international human rights formations, including the United Nations (1945) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), is inseparable from the United States’ insatiable ambitions for global superpower status. Williams emphasizes that the establishment of a post–World War II human rights regime is linked to the U.S. state’s desire to contain communism and anticolonial movements, while Yoneyama contemplates the racialized assumptions associated with the very concept of the “human” within human rights.

Yet, despite the confounding origins of contemporary human rights discourse (which is too long and complicated of a history to be explored in depth in this essay), scholars have also pushed for a more nuanced engagement with human rights discourse—both as a complex historical formation and as an apparatus utilized by a range of actors for very different purposes.¹ While Yoneyama (2016, 11–12), for instance, is skeptical of international human rights, she emphasizes that it is necessary for subjects to avail themselves to the “existing realm of politics, law and human rights regimes” to expose its working asymmetries. Yoneyama also suggests that moving through existing human rights protocols permits participants to attend to the ways in which true justice remains beyond and outside of law, in the Derridean sense. Hence the subjects of war actualize alternative forms of justice that cannot be wholly subsumed by hegemonic systems of power and knowledge.

Taking stock of these insights offered by Yoneyama, this essay addresses the implications of human rights in relation to the (re)collection, documentation, and archiving of Korean War memories in South Korea. Treating human rights discourse as a starting point of discussion rather than an end point anchored by definitive conclusions, I draw on the oeuvre of the Korean diasporic artist Minouk Lim to contemplate how multimedia artists inhabit the role of war documentarian. Specifically,

this short essay considers Lim's use of aesthetic strategies to consider an archive of memories eclipsed by (inter)national human rights documentation projects. By focusing on Lim's video installation *The Promise of If* (2015) as a primary memory work, I am especially interested in the artist's engagement with formal documentation practices that signify the South Korean government as the central arbitrator of justice—even as the state simultaneously acts as the central perpetrator of systemic violence. However, rather than simply forgoing state depositories of war memory, Lim critically engages their discursive formation to intimate how institutionalized archives unexpectedly point to alternative mnemonic renderings and meanings of justice.

■ DISAPPEARANCE AND THE POSTINDEXICAL ARCHIVE

Before segueing into a discussion of *The Promise of If*, I would like to provide a brief historical context that attends to the key themes explored in Lim's works. Born in 1968, Lim cites her coming of age under Park Chunghee's military dictatorship as an important influence on her artistic practice. As observed by Susan Gibbs in her profile of Lim in a 2014 issue of *artasiapacific*, Lim's multimedia works examine different consequences affiliated with the Korean War, including South Korea's rapid capitalist development—bolstered by American economic aid and political tutelage—from 1945 to the present moment. For Lim, South Korea's breathtaking growth is a militarized by-product of war: as Park Chunghee puts it, the country's unfettered economic development became a strategic means to strengthen anticommunist military power and national security against the north (see Moon and Jun 2011).² Chung-in Moon and Byung-joon Jun (2011, 116) emphasize that “[South Korean] civil society was reorganized . . . for national harmony and economic prosperity along the military ideals of order, discipline and collectivism.” Therefore Park's grandiose vision of national collectivism was aligned with notions of self-sacrifice, militarized discipline, and national fidelity and the privileging of national economic development over civilian rights and distributive justice.

Park's delinking of economic development from social rights is notable since his separation of the economic and social spheres registers a disjuncture between sovereign power and the rights of the civilian, the latter of which are suspended by the state to achieve national economic success. Indeed, during Park's nearly two-decade rule (1961–79), civilians suspected of communist or “red” sentiments were labeled as deviant others existing outside of proper national citizenry (see Moon 2015; Lee 2009). The state's purging of these dissidents, including labor organizers,

leftist intellectuals, artists, farmers, and religious activists, became so common under Park's rule that disappearance became an apparatus necessary for achieving South Korean militarized modernity rather than a mere consequence of national development. Disappearance and erasure played other crucial roles in the reconstruction of an anticommunist, hypercapitalist South Korea. As filmmaker Gina Kim states in her documentary *Faces of Seoul* (2009), the capital city of Seoul was killed "twice" after 1945—first by the aerial bombing raids during the Korean War and second by Park's ambitious five-year modernization plans, which created sustained patterns of displacement and dispossession that continue, albeit in different forms, today.

Grappling with how modes of disappearance are integral to South Korea's "miraculous" advancement, Lim's oeuvre contemplates the material, social, and affective consequences of so-called national success. Linking South Korean statecraft and economic development with the machinery of war, Lim is especially attentive to an array of subjects and spaces deemed disposable to national collectivism. However, rather than simply deploying recuperation, retrieval, and recognition to contend with these losses, Lim instead mobilizes evacuation, erasure, and removal as conditions of possibility for her work, precisely because the evidentiary traces she is interested in—disappeared civilian bodies, missing family members, and the detritus of accelerated development—can *never* be retrieved or replaced. In this way, Lim charts the causal factors leading to South Korea's militarized capitalist history while refusing to draw on direct representation to critique this trajectory. For instance, in one of her most prominent public interventions, *SOS Adoptive Dissensus* (2004), Lim stages a nighttime sequence of site-specific performances along the Han River to conceptualize a mnemonic methodology of conjuring, rather than recovering, forever disappeared spaces and bodies under the militarized state's tabula rasa urban development policies.³

To some degree, Lim's engagement with the possibilities and limitations of visual representation resonates with what Lisa Saltzman (2006) refers to as the "postindexical." If the indexical, as Saltzman argues, refers to a "mode of signification" predicated on "physical continuity," "material relation," and "the trace of touch," the postindexical is a critical engagement with the visual's capacity to "question that capacity, critique that capacity, empty that capacity" (13). Emerging more as a "form" than as a "function of [pure] representation," the postindexical is central to Lim's aesthetic practice insofar as her work addresses the problematic of perceiving that which is always already extracted or obscured from the field of vision (Saltzman 2006). Through the postindexical, Lim hints at the

ethical distance that defines the relationality between cultural producers and the historical subjects explored in their work. This sense of removal, of course, is not tantamount to the fictional stance of objectivity but instead considers the skewed power dynamics embedded in cultural production. Forging a “self-conscious relation” of proximate distance with the subjects of her work, Lim examines histories of war, violence, and loss without ventriloquizing the textured voices of the disappeared (Saltzman 2006).

■ THE PROMISE OF IF

If the postindexical emerges as an aesthetic strategy throughout much of Lim’s work, *The Promise of If* broadly draws on this approach to examine the discursive processes related to the archiving of war memories in South Korea. A two-channel video installation included in a solo exhibit curated by Seoul’s Plateau Samsung Museum of Art in 2016, *The Promise of If* includes thirty minutes of remediated excerpts culled from a massive depository of state archival footage—453 hours and 45 minutes of video, to be exact—originating from a 1983 televised marathon in South Korea. Facilitated by the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), a government-funded media platform, the improvised marathon, now referred to as *Finding Dispersed Families* (Isan ‘Gajok Ch’atgi), initially aired as a ninety-five-minute special program dedicated to those separated from their families during the Korean armed conflict. During the broadcast, selected participants were able to search and make pleas for their missing loved ones. Owing to the immense response generated by these appeals, KBS extended the program. Lasting 138 days, from June 30 to November 14, 1983, and culminating in more than 10,189 family unions, *Finding Dispersed Families* is still cited by South Korean politicians as a pivotal moment presaging future family reunifications. Yet, while the program is commendable in many ways, *Finding Dispersed Families* is also skeptically viewed by some scholars, artists, and activists as a spectacular ploy staged by the South Korean government to mitigate or deflect from accrued criticisms directed at the country’s military government (see Kim 2017; Kim 1988).

As observed on the bilingual KBS website focusing on *Finding Dispersed Families*, the televised program sought to raise “widespread recognition in Korea and around the world” of the unhealed Cold War wounds left by Korean division.⁴ As detailed on this website, KBS received several international accolades for its programming, including recognition at the sixth annual World Media Conference as the “most humane program of 1983.”⁵ In 2015, the archives of *Finding Dispersed Families*, which include thousands of videotapes, photographs, signs, and other ephemera, were deposited into UNESCO’s Memory of the World Register. An international

Figure 4. Still image from *The Promise of If*. Image courtesy of the artist/Archives of Korean Broadcasting System (KBS).

program founded in 1992, the Memory of the World Register promotes the world's human rights documentary heritage through technical assistance, training in preservation methods, and providing sponsorship for projects exhibiting "world significance" and "outstanding universal value." Eligible human rights projects are nominated by national and regional committees and ultimately selected by the UNESCO International Advisory Committee (IAC) for preservation. For UNESCO, *Finding Dispersed Families* represents a significant historical event that contributes to the organizational goal of "guard[ing] against collective amnesia."⁶

The Promise of If problematizes these principles and practices of documentation by mimicking the curatorial process itself. In particular, Lim's selection of a mere thirty minutes from four hundred plus hours of video footage points to several questions. First, how exactly does a documentarian go about selecting memories deemed worthy of global memorialization? Second, what criterion is used to determine the "universal value" of such memories? Last, which actors are licensed to make such decisions? While the installation does not provide definitive answers to these inquiries, Lim's decision to dig deep into the state's memory archive only to

radically alter its arrangement unsettles the polished imagery of *Finding Dispersed Families*. The installation, in fact, does not include an uninterrupted thirty-minute segment from the program; instead, Lim remixes scenes to create a montage of haphazard moments captured throughout the televised marathon. In the first ten minutes of *The Promise of If*, dialogues between various participants are depicted: in these encounters, two participants residing in different cities (for instance, Seoul and Daegu) are simultaneously shown on a split screen, teleconferencing, via KBS, to determine whether they are related. Emotionally intense, many of these virtual conversations end with impassioned pleas for family and national reunification. In the next ten minutes, muted close-ups of participants are portrayed with signs detailing the names, ages, and other identifying markers of disappeared family members.

During these clips, Lim renders the footage in slow motion and produces a chain of moving image portraits. Through these silent elongations of time, details that viewers might otherwise miss become apparent: participants intently stare at the camera with different expressions, ranging from somber looks of anxiety and apprehension to flattened expressions of numbness. In the final ten minutes of the work, the screen multiplies into a tiled mosaic of nine cacophonous segments that concurrently play on the screen. While the audience might be startled by this shift from silence to an incomprehensible mélange of voices, the pairing of these oppositional acoustics echoes the extreme affects produced by the terror of war: many live in a resigned state of absence and unknowing or are inconsolable in their pain and fear.

Lim's tactical manipulation of existing footage might be described as a postindexical strategy insofar as the artist refuses to use KBS's visual archives as evidential traces. Rather, the artist-documentarian's methods of selection, archiving, and re-representation explore the discursive processes and political stakes associated with state and international processes of documentation. Mobilizing the state's visual archive as a "point of reference" rather than a "referential structure of representation," Lim's dissident remediation emphasizes how all documentation projects—no matter how seemingly thorough, extensive, or ambitious—are always subjective, partial, and open ended (Saltzman 2006). Consequently, Lim's refusal to render the archived footage in its original form produces a wholly different, if not unfaithful, archive—an archive of deeply visceral memories that fails to abide by the formulaic timeline privileged by KBS: families are dispersed, they attempt to locate each other, they are miraculously reunited.

Here I return to the middle segment of *The Promise of If*. Resembling

Figure 5. Still image from *The Promise of If*. Image courtesy of the artist/Archives of Korean Broadcasting System (KBS).

still photographs, the slow-motion footage, at least on initial glance, gestures to what Roland Barthes describes as the spectral, even deathly, quality of the photograph (see Barthes 1980). As archived images of the past, these moving portraits depict persons who will eventually succumb to age. Indeed, as Lim's work remediates clips first filmed over three decades ago, *The Promise of If's* contemporary audience might wonder whether the program's elderly participants ever had an opportunity to reunite with their families before their own imminent deaths. Yet, considering the literal continuation of the Korean War, these portraits, I would argue, do not necessarily signify mortality. Rather, they gesture to a state of limbo that teeters between life and death: with the exception of a few hundred inter-Korean reunions strategically facilitated by the North and South Korean governments in the past thirty-five years, the vast majority of separated families will never definitively know the fate of their loved ones located on the opposite side of the Demilitarized Zone. In their minds, life and death become interlinked via the chasm of division and unknowing. The very title of Lim's work—*The Promise of*

If—insinuates this tantalizing potentiality of reunification (“promise”), even as it punctuates the uncertainty of such possibilities (“if”). Lim’s work emphasizes that with the Korean War, there is no such thing as an after or a post. Only a present.

I end this essay with a closer reading of these portraits because these images do not only intimate a wide latitude of affective conditions or pervasive absence that characterizes the unfinished Korean War. They also raise questions related to the circumstances surrounding these staged reunions and the outcomes of *Finding Dispersed Families*. While UNESCO and KBS celebrate the ways in which the televised program facilitated more than ten thousand family reunions, they do not disclose that these reunions, in fact, were *not* inter-Korean reunions; rather, they occurred among South Koreans. During and immediately after the program, participants reunited after decades of separation discovered that they lived in the same city or even within a few kilometers of each other. As Nan Kim (2017, 7) poignantly observes, strong anticommunist sentiments in South Korea, paired with the state’s policy of red-baiting, made it nearly impossible for civilians to inquire about lost family potentially associated with the north. N. Kim and Choong Soon Kim also suggest that KBS producers deliberately used the program to pronounce anticommunist ideals: disproportionate time was allotted for participants who explicitly espoused anti-North Korean feelings and extolled the virtues of South Korea, while ambivalent civilians searching for family were cut off from the program or limited to fifteen seconds of airtime (Kim 1988, 112). In other words, the convoluted terrain of feelings that exceed the bipolar schematic of the Cold War is missing from the state’s archive of family reunions. C. S. Kim continues by describing the troubling process of applying for a coveted slot on the televised broadcast, with illiterate applicants seeking help during the registration process being intermittently charged exorbitant fees by state volunteers (Kim 1988, 116). In that sense, the desperation and fear exhibited by participants circle back to the tactical role played by the South Korean government in *sustaining* division through state-sponsored polemical discourse, anticommunist surveillance, and uneven administrative procedures. In turn, the state’s selective remembering is intimately informed by the foreclosure of other kinds of memories. As Viet Thanh Nguyen (2016, “Just Memory”) warily reminds us, this self-serving move might “make us feel better about ourselves,” but it does nothing to foster more ethical approaches to grappling with the ugliness of war. In this case, true justice is evacuated from a state-sponsored project that is dependent on and reproduces a nationalistic rhetoric of “us versus them.” Hence, despite UNESCO’s framing

of *Finding Dispersed Families* as a project committed to alleviating Cold War tensions, I suggest that the program instead mirrors the unsettling antagonistic tendencies of the Cold War.

The Promise of If asks its audience to carefully reconsider the calculus of representation affixed to (inter)nationally recognized archives, especially as state-constructed meanings of justice, resolution, and the “national collective” are conditioned by a politics of (un)belonging. That is, if *Finding Dispersed Families*, as a human rights project, succeeds in guarding against collective amnesia (as KBS and UNESCO proclaim), it would behoove us to examine who or what is signified by the terms *human rights*, *collective*, and *amnesia*. Perhaps this interrogation will push us to generate other critical memory practices that underscore how war’s messy entanglements rub against and at times exceed the state’s manufactured notions of justice and injustice.

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■ NOTES

1. For instance, refer to the critical analysis offered by Parikh (2017).
2. For a closer analysis of the militarized capitalist development of South Korea following 1960, refer to Moon (2015) as well as Paik (2011).
3. For a complete catalog of Minouk Lim’s work, refer to her website, <http://www.minouklim.com/>.
4. For the KBS website in English, refer to <http://english.kbsarchive.com/>; for the KBS website in Korean, refer to <http://family.kbsarchive.com/>.
5. Refer to coverage provided by the KBS website, <http://english.kbsarchive.com/>.
6. Refer to the UNESCO Memory of the World Register site for *Finding Dispersed Families*: <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/memory-of-the-world/register/full-list-of-registered>

-heritage/registered-heritage-page-8/the-archives-of-the-kbs-special
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