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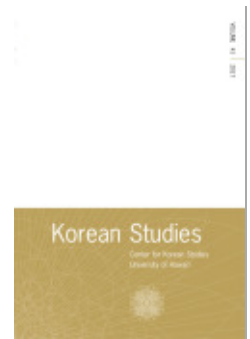
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Korean *Han* and the Postcolonial Afterlives of “The Beauty of Sorrow”

Sandra So Hee Chi Kim

In this article, I depart from the typical discussion of the Korean sociocultural concept of *han* as a collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger that runs in the blood of all Koreans. Scholars, artists, writers, and critics frequently characterize *han* as “the Korean ethos” and the soul of Korean art, literature, and film. It is said to be unique to Koreans and incomprehensible to Westerners. I argue, however, that its contemporary biologicistic-oriented meaning emerged first during the Japanese colonial period as a colonial stereotype, and that tracing the afterlife of *han* gives us a postcolonial understanding of its deployment in culture. I examine how *han* originated under the contradictions of coloniality, how it evolved from a colonial construct to its adoption into Korean ethnonationalism, and how it travels into a completely new context through the Korean diaspora. Rather than dismissing *han* as nothing more than a social construct, I instead define *han* as an affect that encapsulates the grief of historical memory—the memory of past collective trauma—and that renders itself racialized/ethnicized and attached to nation.

Keywords: Mongol empire, Koryŏ dynasty, Yuan dynasty, Ming dynasty, diplomacy, Asia

Introduction

If we lived in paradise, there would be no tears, no separation, no hunger, no waiting, no suffering, no oppression, no war, no death. We would no longer need either hope or despair. We would lose those hopes so dear to us all. We Koreans call these hopes Han. It is not an easy word to understand. It has

generally been understood as a sort of resentment. But I think it means both sadness and hope at the same time. You can think of Han as the core of life, the pathway leading from birth to death. Literature, it seems to me, is an act of Han and a representation of it. . . . Han, which comprises both sadness and hope, is a feeling unique to the Korean people.

—Park Kyong-ni (1994)

[The] terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively. The representation of difference must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.

—Homi Bhabha (1994:3)

When South Korean figure skating champion Kim Yuna was passed over for the gold medal at the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics despite her flawless, moving performance, Koreans were up in arms at the seeming injustice. More than two million people signed an online petition objecting to the result and representatives in South Korea sent a protest letter to the International Olympics Committee. The event triggered a so-called collective state of resentment and national mourning that was frequently referred to in public and social media as an experience of Korean *han*. Lee Hee-kyeong, a psychiatrist in Kyōnggi Province, explained *han* in an interview with a foreign news outlet: “Here, the suffering becomes a part of you, a part of your blood, and there is a big emphasis on the sadness more than Western countries” (Cain, 2014).

Dr. Lee’s response encapsulates several aspects of the discourse of *han* that historically have been prominent. *Han* (한恨) is an essentialist Korean sociocultural concept that is popularly understood as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger. *Han* is often described as running in the blood of all Koreans, and the quality of Korean sorrow as being different from anything Westerners have experienced or can understand. One American scholar of Korean studies tells the story of how he once received a message from an elderly Korean gentleman, stating, “I am so happy to hear about an American professor who wants to learn about my country. I can teach you what you need to know. It is a word called *han* and the soul of Korean art, literature, and film” (Grinker, 1998:78). Though one can certainly find people—particularly among the youth on the one hand, and scholars on the other—who do not relate to *han* and dismiss it as an outdated construct, many academics, artists, writers, and critics continue to characterize *han* as a characteristic of Koreans and the root of Korean culture. As recently as 2015 Korean rapper Tablo released a song (“Hood”) that makes *han* its central theme; researchers (Kim Yoon and Williams) published a cinema

studies monograph on how *han* (along with *chōng*) captures “the Korean ethos”; writer Patricia Park debuted with a novel (*Re Jane*) in which a key chapter is entitled *Han*. *Han* continues to circulate widely, both in Korea and in Korean-America.

The concept of *han* indexes an affective complex that is so wide-ranging, adaptive, and invested with cultural and nationalistic significance, that defining it precisely has been difficult for scholars. It has been understood not only as the deep-rooted grief, bitterness, and longings that Koreans experience as the result of a long history of oppression and injustice, but also as the pain that Koreans experience from their individual life circumstances. Nancy Abelmann (1996:36–37) suggests that *han* connotes “both the collective and the individual genealogical sense of the hardship of historical experience.” As such, the concept of *han* harbors a tension between the word’s social and individual referents. Roy Grinker (1998:79) observes that, “if the symbolic contours of *han* are undefinable, so too are the sociological contours, for it can be contained within individuals and within collectivities.” While a nation does not go through the same psychological processes as an individual, the Korean concept of *han* encapsulates how collective trauma and individual hardship can create a complex feedback loop within the social imaginary. At the individual level, Choe Gil-seong (1991) describes *han* as a kind of mental state of giving up, resulting from an extensive experience of frustrating and tragic life events. At the collective level, Korean American novelist Richard E. Kim’s (1991:25) view is representative in his insistence that *han* is one of the most important elements in understanding Korean and diasporic Korean cultural texts psychologically and philosophically.

The insistence on the uniqueness of *han* to the Korean people has a biologicistic element to it—if one is Korean, one is born with *han* and cannot escape it. The poet Ko Ŭn (1988:306; my translation) famously wrote, “We cannot deny that we were born from the womb of *han* and raised in the bosom of *han*.” Korean poet Kim Chiha elaborates a biologicistic idea of *han* when he writes that “accumulated *han* is inherited and transmitted, boiling in the blood of the people.” Kim Chiha focuses on the deep negativity of *han*, even describing it as “a people eating monster.” For Kim, *han* is a “ghostly creature” that “appears as a concrete substance with enormous ugly and evil energy”(as cited in Suh, 1983:63–64). *Han*’s destructive and haunting potential is, not only widely accepted in popular culture and urban legends, but also by Korean medical professionals. As the Korean psychiatrist I mentioned implied, suffering is believed to be a part of the blood of Koreans, passed on from one generation to the next, individual and collective suffering accumulating as time moves on. In

Korea, one can even die of *han*, from the associated clinically diagnoseable disease called *hwabyōng*. *Hwabyōng* is cited in *Kaplan and Sadock's Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry* (2009) as an example of the “intergenerational transmission of emotions”: “In Korea, there is even a specific culture-bound diagnosis known as *hwabyōng* that translates as anger syndrome complete with identifiable physical symptoms such as insomnia, fatigue, panic, fear of impending death, indigestion, loss of appetite, difficulty breathing, palpitations, generalized aches and pains, and a feeling of fullness in the abdominal region.” A research article found in the *PubMed Central* database of the National Center for Biotechnology information describes *hwabyōng* as “a cultural syndrome specific to Koreans and Korean immigrants” (Lee, Wachholtz, & Choi, 2014:49). *Han* and *hwabyōng* have even been hypothesized by Korean American media correspondents as the possible cause of “two of the six bloodiest school shootings in American history [carried] out by Korean gunmen,” Seung-hui Cho and One Go (Chung, 2012; Kang, 2013). The medicalization of *hwabyōng* is the biologism of *han* taken to a logical extreme.

Despite the deeply negative and destructive quality of *han*, it is not a one-dimensional “bad” affect. It historically has been characterized as also creating complex beauty. In fact, *han* not only refers to a consciousness of ongoing trauma and a lack of resolution, but also the *means* to its own resolution. *Han* has an important place in culture because it has become associated with what makes Korean cultural productions—such as visual art, folk music, traditional ceramics, literature, and film, among others—uniquely and beautifully Korean. Countless articles have been written about how the Korean experience of *han* has a peculiar and distinct manifestation in cultural forms. Anthropologist Roy Grinker (1998:78) observes that *han* conceptually provides “a path for the movement of the present into the past, for a fresh and creative movement from the past and present into the future.” Similarly, literary scholar Cheon I-du (1985:15) insists that “han has both negativity and transcendence nested within it.” Park Kyong-ni, one of Korea’s most famous novelists, gave a keynote address in 1994 called “The Feelings and Thoughts of the Korean People in Literature” at a colloquium at the University of Paris. A quote from it is the opening epigraph of this article. In it she emphasizes how the concept of *han* subsumes the feeling of hope as integral to the Korean experience of suffering. It is “the core of life,” from which are born “acts of *han*” such as Korean literature. For Park, “*Han*, which comprises both sadness and hope, is a feeling unique to the Korean people,” and therefore the soul of Korean cultural productions.

In order to emphasize how integral *han* is to Korean identity, many

scholars have focused on what they claim is *han*'s long history. In this particular discourse, the origins of Korean *han* have been attributed to every experience of injustice that the country has experienced: Korea's purported long history of foreign invasions; colonization; prolonged poverty and starvation under oppression; the tyranny of ruling classes, first in the feudal caste system as well as later, during the period of rapid industrialization; the abuses of power by one authoritarian military regime after another in the postwar period; oppressions of religious ideologies (see Suh 1983; Park, 1993, 1996; Lee, 1994; Kim and Choi, 1995; Son, 2000; Joh, 2006; Park, 2008; Kim Yoon and Williams, 2015). Though it is true that *han* itself is a Sino-Korean character that has been in the Korean language for a long time, it is arguably not a specifically Korean characteristic. In fact, according to a Chinese-English dictionary, the Chinese character *han* is *hen* ("hate") in Chinese, *kon* ("to bear a grudge") in Japanese, *han* ("frustration") in Vietnamese, *horosul* ("sorrowfulness") in Mongolian, and *korsocuka* ("grief") in Manchurian (Park, 1996:10–11). While *han* appears in similar manifestations in other Asian languages and cultures that incorporate Chinese script, it has taken on decidedly ethnonationalist and essentialist tones in the Korean context.

My research suggests that its contemporary nationalist, biologicistic-oriented meaning emerged first during the Japanese colonial period as a colonial stereotype.¹ In this article, I will draw out a genealogy of the usage of *han* within the broader history of the development of Korean ethnonationalism. I depart from the typical discussion of *han* as a uniquely Korean collective feeling of suffering that runs in the blood of all Koreans. I examine how *han* originated under the contradictions of coloniality, how it evolved from a colonial construct to its adoption into Korean ethnonationalism, and how it travels into completely new contexts through the Korean diaspora. I suggest that tracing the afterlives of the colonial origins of *han* gives us a postcolonial understanding of its deployment in culture. Finally, rather than dismissing *han* as nothing more than a social construct, I instead define *han* as an affect that encapsulates the grief of historical memory—the memory of past collective trauma—and that renders itself racialized/ethnicized and attached to nation.

The Colonial Origins of *Han*

To take *han* at face value as some kind of originary Korean subjectivity is problematic from a postcolonial perspective. The idea of nation itself is a recent social construct, and the formative years of Korea's nation-oriented

consciousness is coeval with its position as a Japanese colony in the 1900s, after the Japanese themselves imported the idea of nation from the “West” (see Anderson, 1983; Kwon, 2015; Shin, 2006). The whole notion of “prehistoric Korea” was, according to archeologist Hyung Il Pai (2000), a colonial product originating with Japanese studies in the Korean peninsula. Despite the vehemently anti-Japanese stance and patriotic efforts of Korean historians and archeologists to write a new racial history of Korea’s past, “their theories continue to mirror the main tenets and methodology of Japanese colonial racial paradigms” (Pai, 2000:261). I would like instead to focus on the processes that produced such an articulation of cultural difference as *han*. How do these processes elaborate what Homi Bhabha (1994:2–3) calls “strategies of selfhood,” both singular and communal, that initiate new structures of identity as well as processes of collaboration and contestation? Bhabha warns that the representation of difference “must not be hastily read as the reflection of *pre-given* ethnic or cultural traits set in the fixed tablet of tradition.” I want to suggest that *han* is an example of a social construct produced in the colonial articulation of cultural difference, which has since become naturalized by ethnonational forces.

Scholars often note that the term *han* itself emerged as a significant ideological concept during the 1970s, in service of the *minjung* “people’s” democratic movement as well as other economic and political activities (Eckert et al., 1990; Abelman, 1996; Ng, 2013; Moon, 2014). Reclaiming authentic Koreanness and traditional culture was a large part of this discourse. The development of national culture also has been very important in government policy, from the first republic with President Rhee Syngman and onward with every administration after that, establishing a practice of heavy government subsidy in the cultural sector (Yim, 2002). Some contend that it was during the Park Chung Hee regime that the idea of *han* transformed from a personal sense of sorrow and resentment to a broader, national experience of unrelenting suffering and injustice (Willoughby, 2000; Killick, 2003). In general, the desire for cultural reclamation was universally championed by the powerful and the powerless alike, and the embrace of *han* as Korea’s national ethos served even opposing political discourses.

As a national phenomenon or specifically Korean characteristic, *han* did not exist in ancient Korea but was an idea anachronistically imposed on Koreans during the Japanese colonial period. At the height of Japanese empire flourished a period of enthusiasm for Korean colonial exotica, known as “the Korea Boom.” The collections of colonial exotica emerged from a nostalgia for a bygone culture and imperial desires for exotic

Koreanness. While it appeared as genuine appreciation for Korean culture, the Korea Boom and its discourses in fact veiled collusion with its domination and destruction. Such colonial contradictions can be detected in the Japanese “expert” critical commentary. In *Intimate Empire*, Nayoung Aimee Kwon (2015:40–41) shows how this critical commentary was at its core an Orientalist discourse, which Orientalized Koreans while making the Japanese seem more Western. Kwon focuses on “the colonial modern subject” (p. 11) such as Korean and Japanese novelists at the colonial contact zones under the shadows of Western standards of value and developmentalist history. For example, the Korean colonial writer Kim Saryang, who was a finalist for a Japanese literary award, was praised for capturing “the peculiar ambience of Koreans” (p. 51). This “peculiar ambience of Koreans” was in fact part and parcel of a broader cultural discourse that sought to distinguish Koreans from Japanese. I suggest that this search for a “peculiar” Korean quality can likewise be detected in Japanese critical discourse on the Korean “beauty of sorrow” that emerged during the Korea Boom with reference to Korean ceramics. It bears a remarkable similarity to the concept of *han*.

The writings of Yanagi Muneyoshi (1889–1961), the foremost “expert” on Korean ceramics during the colonial period, reveal how apparent admiration of Korean culture is nevertheless framed in terms of Korea’s inferior racial otherness. Regarding Chosŏn dynasty pottery, he suggests that the “designs drawn on them are sometimes so crude and primitive that they might have been done by children. Indeed, one may rightly call them childish—but, strangely or not, they are beautiful just as they are” (Yanagi, 1972:142). In an essay on the Korean Kizaemon tea bowl, he writes, “It is impossible to believe that those Korean workmen possessed intellectual consciousness. It was precisely because they are not intellectuals that they were able to produce this natural beauty” (p. 194). Thus, because Koreans are childish, primitive, and lacking in intellect and taste, Yanagi claims that Japanese artists, try as they might, cannot simulate Korean pottery. In his role as Korean pottery expert, he appears to praise Korean pottery while also upholding qualities like ambition, taste, strength, and cleverness as essentially Japanese traits.

In addition to describing Koreans as childish and primitive, throughout *The Unknown Craftsman* (1972), a collection of Yanagi’s essays spanning Korea’s colonial and early postwar periods, Yanagi repeatedly employs descriptives for Koreans like, “clumsy,” “plain,” “unagitated,” “uncalculated,” “harmless,” and “meek.” The discourse of Korean cultural objects relied on othering Koreans as essentially different from the Japanese. Experts in all fields of Korean colonial exotica translated cultural objects into figuring

Koreans as docile, ignorant, naïve, and complacent subjects of empire. In a particularly revealing moment in Yanagi's text, he writes, "The pieces assume no pretensions, they are simply there, in all their naturalness, looking as if they would like to say to ingenious modern artists, 'There is nothing we want. Come and join us. Everybody will be saved'" (p. 142). The message here is that Koreans are completely unthreatening and even invite domination. Koreans require the Japanese interpreter and critic to protect them and to make the naïve and helpless "unknown craftsmen" known to the world.

After his first trip to Korea in 1916, Yanagi developed a keen interest in Korean art and defined the nature of the Korean aesthetic as an "aesthetics of sorrow" in 1920. Japanese scholar Soji Takasaki (2006:74) has written about Yanagi: "Regarding the Korean aesthetic, he defines it as an 'aesthetics of sorrow,' or 'beauty of familiarity,' and notes the 'painful history' behind it." Yanagi contended that the prevalence of white in Choson ceramics and Korean clothing was evidence of a national despondency, which he aestheticized as "sorrowful beauty" (*hiai no bi*) and "the beauty of that which perishes" (*hirobite yukitsutsu aru mono no utsukushisa*). In 1922, Yanagi wrote: "The people, by wearing white clothing, are mourning for eternity. . . . Is not the paucity of color true proof of the absence of pleasure in life?" (Atkins, 2010:167). He claimed that the art of any country reflects the psychology of its people, as formed by the natural environment and its history. Korea's geographic condition as a peninsula combined with its history of foreign aggressions has created a Korean essence that is lonely, sorrowful, and superstitious. By contrast, Japan's security and comfort created art that was essentially optimistic and playful (Brandt, 2007:30–31). Kim Brandt has written extensively on Yanagi's discourse of the Korean "beauty of sorrow." While Yanagi was very much considered a champion of Korean art, Brandt (2000:713) suggests that a consideration of Yanagi's early period of "Korean activism" reveals the process by which Japanese colonialism reinvented Korean art in Japan in a way that reproduced colonial power. In general, the writings of Japanese "experts" on Korean cultural objects contributed to a larger body of colonial knowledge about Koreans "in terms that made Korea's status as a colonial possession of Japan seem both natural and inevitable" (p. 714).

This characterization of Koreans as perpetually sad spread through the discourse of other Korean arts. Kitahara Shiroaki, writing in the preface for Kim So-un's 1929 anthology of Korean folk songs, wrote: "For several reasons having to do with national conditions and national character, Korean folk songs are blessed with a bitter irony and sardonic wit, more so than Japanese folk songs" (Atkins, 2010:167). Koga Masao, a prominent

Japanese composer who was a champion of Korean folk music, claimed that “an eerie, overarching pathos” was the defining characteristic of Korean folk songs. Korean folk music did not historically rely on many instruments, therefore “the peasants sing when they meet for work, they sing when they are sad, and they sing if happy. It is through songs that they express and console themselves” (Atkins, 2010:166). We see the influence of this particular colonial discourse in the contemporary characterization of *pansori*. *Pansori*, a popular Korean art of musical storytelling that originated in seventeenth-century Korea, has come to be considered a “national” art and symbol of a supposed pure Korean essence. It is frequently referred to as “the sound of han” (Willoughby, 2000).

Such characterizations of Koreans served colonial purposes in several ways. First, by implying that melancholy as a national attribute preceded the Japanese occupation, it naturalized the suffering of the colonized as something inherent and inevitable. Second, insofar as the melancholy was linked to an idea of Korean helplessness and naïveté, the discourse of the Korean “aesthetics of sorrow” also supported a rationalization of Japan’s position of authority. Sociologist Gi-Wook Shin (2006:44) indicates that the Japanese believed that “the yellow race together possessed superior elements, and the only reasons for the present Korean racial decline were bad government and confining geographical factors.” The innate melancholy of Koreans was just another sign of their racial decline, justifying the need for Japan’s superior leadership.

On a fundamental level, the characterization of Koreans as a sorrowful people served to provide a racialized essence that helped support a larger endeavor to categorize the ways in which Koreans were different from the Japanese. Yanagi’s, Koga’s and Kitahara’s characterizations of Koreans reflected and helped proliferate the stereotype of malcontent Koreans (*futei senjin*). Jinhee Lee’s (2013) research on the genealogy of “malcontent Koreans” reveals the stereotype’s roots in the contradictions of colonial constructions of difference, especially when Koreans in the metropole increasingly looked more and more like the Japanese in dress and language and education. This indistinguishability of the colonized from the colonizer led to increased colonial anxiety of the invisible enemy within, or as Homi Bhabha (1994:127) might describe it, “almost the same but not quite.” In 1913, Japan’s Ministry of Home Affairs even published a confidential document to aid the police force in distinguishing Koreans from Japanese. *The Source Material to Distinguish Koreans (Chōsenjin shikibetsu shiryō)* pored over meticulous detail of so-called Korean facial and body features, including things like straighter posture, less facial hair, flatter faces, flatter skulls (Lee, 2013:132–133). These stereotypes of malcontent, “bad” Koreans,

along with their contradictory characterizations as sorrowful, hopeless, clownish, and naïve, illustrate what Homi Bhabha (1994:49) calls “the incalculable colonized subject—half acquiescent, half oppositional, always untrustworthy.” This highlights the unresolvable problem of cultural difference within so-called racial sameness for the Japanese colonial authority. Colonial discourse thus simultaneously produces the colonized as a social reality that is at once “other” and yet entirely knowable and visible.

The Korea Boom, the discourse of experts on Korean objects/subjects, the categorization of Korean racial features, all worked hand in hand as types of knowledge that both supported and were supported by the colonial racialization of Koreans.

Han emerged in a colonial context in which the Japanese colonial authorities, writers, scholars, critics, etc., were simultaneously and contradictorily trying to both essentialize Koreans as different from Japanese, yet appeal to their similarities for peaceful assimilation into empire. Bhabha (1994:51) points out that the enunciation of cultural difference is produced in the colonizer’s attempt to dominate in the name of cultural superiority, and that such an enunciation often exhibits the problematic of how, “in signifying the present, something comes to be repeated, relocated and translated in the name of tradition, in the guise of a pastness that is not necessarily a faithful sign of historical memory but a strategy of representing authority in terms of the artifice of the archaic.” In the colonial Korean context, the discourse of “the beauty of sorrow” maps on to the artifice of the archaic as unsophisticated, naïve, sad, and hopeless. It is a manifestation of the objective of colonial discourse, which is to render the colonized as a population of racial degenerates in order to justify conquest.

***Han* as Ethnonational Translation**

This article began with an introduction to an established cultural discourse in Korea that describes Koreans as a peculiarly sad people. This discourse evokes *han* as a national characteristic and attributes the collective misery of Koreans to a history in which they have been persistently oppressed by external powers. How did the Japanese imposition of “the beauty of sorrow” translate into *han* as the so-called “Korean ethos”?

Many Koreans saw Yanagi’s “beauty of sorrow” theory as colonial praise, and the vetting of their artistic worth and uniqueness. Yanagi succeeded in gaining significant public support in both Japan and Korea for his various projects to improve Japan–Korea relations through the

cultural preservation and revival of Korea. The Korean intellectual community immediately showed great interest in Yanagi's work, resulting in Korean specialists in his theory (Kwon, 2007). The proliferation of Yanagi's ideas in Korean academic discourse solidified its place in the knowledge apparatus, eventually trickling down through the entire education system.

Sunghee Choi (2011), an art education scholar educated in Korea and later, in the United States, describes the inculcation of the identity of "Korean sorrow." As a young elementary school student, she remembers being taught that "the artistic essence of Korean artefacts [*sic*] lies in their embodiment of sorrow—'han'" (p. 292). In college, she frequently heard iterations of the same discourse, and specifically recalls how Korean ceramics were taught:

I was taught that the aesthetic essence of sorrow is crystallized in the form of Korean white porcelain known as "Bakja" [*sic*]. Initially, I believed this idea was common knowledge: everybody knows what "Han" means to Koreans and how "Bakja" represents the aesthetic beauty of Korea. I later found that this discourse of sorrow had been developed by a Japanese art critic, Muneyoshi Yanagi, in 1920, during the Japanese colonization of Korea and that it had been supported by many colonialists and the Korean public until quite recently. (p. 292)

Choi's depiction of the inculcation of *han* on to her consciousness is that it began as soon as she started schooling, that it was presented to her as a universal truth, so much so that she believed the idea was common knowledge even to Westerners.² What is also noteworthy is that in her discussion of Yanagi, Sunghee Choi cites Kim Brandt as her source (p. 232). Interestingly, Kim Brandt, in all her work on the Japanese colonial construction of the Korean "aesthetics of sorrow," does not actually explicitly connect it to the Korean concept of *han*. Sunghee Choi intuitively connects it to *han* herself, because the connection is clear from her own experience of the discourse within the Korean education system.

The picture we see here, of the colonial racialization of "the beauty of sorrow" becoming *han* as the essential "Korean ethos," is one of Koreans incorporating the logic of dominant power in order to define themselves. They defined themselves with colonizers' words. *Han* illustrates what Nayoung Aimee Kwon (2015:10) refers to as "the labor of the colonized" to translate themselves into the imperial language in an attempt to participate in the imperial discursive space. She suggests that colonial subjects were entrenched in translated, self-divided representations, "compelled to borrow the language of the hegemonic imperial other."

The anxiety of contamination of culture across colonial borders went both ways. A pregnant contradiction in the discourse of Japan's colonial self-legitimization was the idea that Japanese and Koreans were actually one race. This is evident in the colonial slogan of "*Naisen ittai*," which means "Japan and Korea, One Body." Japanese media frequently referred to Koreans as "*doho*," or "our brethren" (Kwon, 2015:158). The colonial policy of "*kominka*," or "unified oneness," was a politically and culturally targeted imperialization that sought to transform the colonized into loyal imperial subjects. Not only were Koreans stripped of land and of all economic means of survival, *kominka* further threatened them with total erasure when the colonizers rewrote Korean history, outlawed the Korean language, substituted worship of the Japanese emperor for native religious practices, and demanded that they adopt Japanese names. One of the results of these cultural annihilation policies was Koreans' fierce insistence on the sanctity of Korean national identity that persists to this day. Nationalist Koreans, in reaction to these contradictory discourses, latched on to the racialized differences that were already available in the colonial sphere as symbols of identity that pushed against the pressures of assimilation and ethnic erasure. Consequently, while the idea of the Korean aesthetics of sorrow helped to legitimize the Japanese colonial project of helping a sorrowful, naïve people, *han* is the Korean word that translates this colonial construct, which Koreans themselves embraced as a special and unique racial essence. Kwon urges us to remain mindful of how "such an ambivalent and melancholy nostalgic turn in the colony toward a perceived and actual loss of its culture" fed a desire to construct and maintain symbols of Koreanness as "a fetishistic placeholder for the absent nation" (p. 108). Kwon points to the kind of psychical dynamic that I believe would have primed Koreans' incorporation of *han* into ethnonational discourse. I would add that colonial modern subjects not only desired to construct symbols of Korean tradition, but to also authenticate their feelings as part and parcel of a racial imaginary that distinguished Koreans from Japanese in an essential, biologicistic way. The idea of *han* then translated itself into the discourse of ethnonationalism within a pervasively biologicistic understanding of the Korean people as a nation.

Jinhee Lee's work on the "malcontent Koreans" colonial stereotype and Nayoung Aimee Kwon's work on colonial Korean writers have been path-breaking for Korean postcolonial studies. Yet both Lee and Kwon tell a story of unidirectional influence of colonial constructs, of how the Japanese imposed them against the will of Koreans. I want to emphasize here, in the context of the concept of *han*, that the act of translation is often created together between the colonizer and the colonized, initiating a

string of translations across time that can bury the genealogical traces of a colonial construct. The colonized co-opted the language of the colonizer. Reading Franz Fanon's claim that the mastery of the colonizer's language brings the colonized "closer to being a real human being," Rey Chow (2014:3) suggests that this is a biosemiotics "in which *language possession is translated into and receives its value as skin color.*" The affects of loss need to be examined in light of how postcolonial languages and cultures are in "the translational process of being dismantled, abandoned, reorganized, and/or reclaimed" (p. 11). The "sorrowful beauty" discourse was a racialized languaging encounter. The very racialized differences that were constructed to validate the colonial hierarchy were used by the colonized as a badge of honor of their uniqueness and right to nationhood. The meanings and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity because of the very deconstructive conditions of enunciation to begin with. *Han* is an example of how the colonized worked with the contradiction inherent in the colonial enterprise.

Gi-Wook Shin's research in his book *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea* (2006) in many ways picks up from the point in history where Nayoung Aimee Kwon and Jinhee Lee leave off. Kwon's and Lee's works illustrate how Japanese ethnicized Koreans as part of the machinery of colonial racism at the same time that they tried to argue that they were the same racial group. Shin's work shows how Koreans ethnicized themselves in reaction to this colonial racism. Read together, we see a larger picture of how strategies of colonial culture like the "aesthetics of sorrow" were appropriated, translated, rehistoricized and read anew by the colonized as *han*.

In *Ethnic Nationalism in Korea*, Shin (2006:22) argues that "the articulation of the Korean nation through such ethnicization or racialization was no doubt a reaction to Japanese colonial racism that sought to subsume the Korean identity under the rubric of the transnational notion of empire." Korean nationalists grasped on to essential qualities that distinguished Koreans from Japanese in reaction to the debates regarding whether Korean and Japanese were of the same racial group, shared ancestry, and also Koreans' place in the Japanese social hierarchy. The biologicistic understandings of race/ethnicity and nation emerged under the influence of social Darwinism, which was in wide circulation at that time amongst colonial Japanese and Koreans. Kato Hiroyuki (1836–1916) was highly influential in shaping East Asian understandings of social Darwinism. His work was introduced to Korea in the 1880s (Shin, 2006:29). Ideas of social Darwinism, coupled with traditional Confucian notions of kinship, in which the state-nation is a family, or a family state, set up Korean nationalists to see Japanese racial theory as simply a justification of their assimilation policy;

they pointed to the colonial reality of inequality and discrimination and “insisted on the purity and uniqueness of the Korean race through notions of distinct blood and ancestry” (Shin, 2006:22). Shin specifies that colonialism alone did not lead to Korean ethnonationalism. The specific style of colonial racism shaped its development to emphasize the uniqueness of Koreans as a race (p. 42).

Shin traces the development of national identity based on a shared bloodline and how South Koreans have come to harbor a racialized image of the nation that centers on the belief of common blood and ancestry. In Korea, the most formative years of nation-oriented consciousness developed within the crucible of colonialism such that ethnic nationalism expressed itself as anticolonialism (p. 18). “It was not until the late 1920s when the Korean nation was ethnicized” (p. 125), Shin points out. The late 1800s saw the rise of Japan and the decline of China, alongside the increasing presence of the West in the East Asian region. The discourse of modernity was always linked with the emergence of nationalisms. As the concept of nation increasingly became the dominant global categorical identity in the 1900s, in Korea the idea of nation itself took on a specifically racialized, ethnicized valence. “Race, ethnicity, and nation were conflated, and this is reflective in the multiple uses of the term *minjok*, the most widely used term for ‘nation,’ which can also refer to ‘ethnie’ and ‘race’” (p. 4). Perceived ethnic homogeneity contributed greatly to how nationalism developed with a strongly biologically ethnic orientation.

Ethnic nationalism’s processes took the colonial origin of “the beauty of sorrow” and produced *han* as an ethnonational, biologicistic badge of Korean uniqueness. Korean historian Paek Namun believed that Korea had a long history of ethnic unity unprecedented in world history that became “objective elements” in the formation of the modern nation. He agreed with writer Yi Kwangsu’s concept of the Korean nation as a “unitary nation with common blood, territory, language, culture, historical destiny for a thousand years, which is exceptional in world history” (Shin, 2006:76). Examination of the nationalist rhetoric of both North Korea’s president Kim Il Sung and South Korea’s president Syngman Rhee emphasizes that the Korean people belong to the same ethnic nation, or *minjok*, and share a single bloodline (p. 152). Ethnic homogeneity is itself often implied as the *raison d’être* of unification proposals in both Koreas. Korea’s famous intellectual, Paik Nak-Chung (1996), has stressed that ethnic forces in Korea can serve to overcome divisions and achieve national unification. He claims that the experience with U.S. and Japanese empire instilled on both sides “a relatively progressive national consciousness”

among Koreans and inflicted “shared suffering” (a clear reference to *han*, which Paik translated into English) that can potentially produce “a peninsula-wide solidarity movement in which national and democratic forces coincide. Shin’s research findings show that Koreans have a “stronger attachment to ethnic Koreans living in foreign countries” than to “ethnic non-Koreans living in Korea” (Shin, 2006:234). Shin attributes this to the strongly blood-based notion of citizenship that developed in response to colonial racism.

Han in the Diaspora

The work of Korean American artists and writers likewise communicate a strong attachment to Korea. *Han* is a concept that is frequently invoked with regard to Koreans in America, with an added emphasis on its *untranslatability*. In a *Los Angeles Times* review of Park Kyong-ni’s book *Land*, Korean American writer K. Connie Kang centers her description of the novel on the idea of *han*: “Park explores the Korean soul. Central to ‘Land’ is *han*, which has no English equivalent. *Han*, the Korean tenet of an eternal woe, unrequited love and unending hope, lives in all Park’s characters” (Kang, 1996; emphasis mine). Kang’s review perpetuates not only the idea of *han* as the collective “soul” of Koreans, but also its uniqueness and complete otherness to Westerners. In an episode of the television show *The West Wing* entitled “Han,” a visiting North Korean pianist teaches President Bartlet the word while requesting asylum in the United States. Bartlet reflects on what could have been written by Park Kyong-ni herself: “There is no literal English translation. It’s a state of mind. Of soul, really. A sadness. A sadness so deep no tears will come. And yet still there’s hope.” D. Bannon, a professional Korean–English translator, discusses the difficulty of translating *han* into English, citing it as one example of “how not all concepts can be translated” and that it is often preferable to leave the foreign word as is in an English translation (2008). Bannon relies on the description of *han* by Korean film critic Ahn Byung-Sup, who in a 1987 article about humor in Korean film, writes that “*Han* is frequently translated as sorrow, spite, rancor, regret, resentment or grief, among many other attempts to explain a concept that has no English equivalent” (emphasis mine).

This idea of untranslatability and the claim to a unique racial “state of mind” or “Korean soul” brings up the question: how does *han* travel and get translated into a completely new context in the Korean diaspora,

where ethnonationalism is not so straightforward, where Korean Americans are a minority group, where the Korean language and culture itself is again made into the other, as it was in the Japanese imperial context?

Returning to Ahn Byung-Sup's (1987) description of *han* can give us some insight into these questions. Addressing a non-Korean or "Western" audience for an English-language publication, Ahn describes *han* with the typical sweeping generalizations: "Han is an inherent characteristic of the Korean character and as such finds expression, implied or explicit, in nearly every aspect of Korean life and culture. . . . Han is held close to the heart, hoping and patient but never aggressive. It becomes part of the blood and breath of a person." He presents *han* in a biologicistic way that implies an inescapable racial essence. It is important to him to emphasize again and again that *han* is an inherent trait in all Koreans, to the extent that it even flows in their blood. Because Ahn himself is a South Korean academic, his description of *han* is deemed authentic and credible by non-Korean scholars of the Korean language like D. Bannon. Bannon cites Ahn in a translation journal, others cite Bannon's citation of Ahn, and the idea proliferates, even ending up as a citation in the Wikipedia entry on "Han (cultural)." These examples are a small window into the larger picture of how the discourse of *han* gets passed on into American contexts. The different ways in which the idea of *han* circulates show not only how Koreans and Korean Americans see themselves racially, but also how they present Koreanness on the world stage. In the American context, where Korean immigrants and their children are regarded as perpetual foreigners, the biologicistic uniqueness of *han* is expressed as untranslatable. I see this as a postcolonial recapitulation and legacy of the dynamic of *han* that began in the era of Japanese occupation, when Koreans then too embraced signs of essential racial difference in order to be seen within a dominant culture that threatened to erase them.

Putting aside the problems of racial essentialism for just a moment, I would like instead to examine how *han* has been employed in the Korean American diasporic context in order to better grasp what it is as a phenomenon. Korean American studies scholars tend to define *han* with a political angle that calls out racial and neocolonial injustices. Grace Cho, in *Haunting the Korean Diaspora* (2008:25, 191), defines *han* as "accumulated grief and rage" and "the knot of emotional residue" of Korean history. She circles around the concept of *han* in order to connect the far-reaching, haunting legacies of the abuse of Korean women under occupation, first as "comfort women" prostitutes for the Japanese Imperial Army, and then later as "*yangongju*" prostitutes for American military

camptowns after World War II. For Cho, *han* has to do with how the trauma and silencing of exploited Korean women continues to haunt their lives and, by extension, the lives of those around them. The *yangongju's* *han* affects both those who know about her trauma, and those who don't; *han* is the ghostly excess remains of trauma that cannot be assimilated (pp. 160–161). Likewise, in “Home is Where the Han is” Elaine Kim (1993:1) defines *han* as “a Korean word that means, loosely translated, the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression.” She uses *han* as a starting point from which to discuss the “psychic damage” of the 1992 Los Angeles upheavals (commonly referred to as the “Rodney King Riots”) on the Korean American community that it devastated. Kim argues that the news media attention on Korean Americans during the so-called “riots,” and on the tension between African Americans and Korean Americans served to divert attention from the roots of racial violence in the United States. She attributes interethnic tensions to the fact that “Koreans and African Americans were kept ignorant about each other by educational and media institutions that erase or distort their experiences and perspectives” (p. 8). She insists on transnational solidarities and in remembering global histories of oppression together so that “our han might be released and we might be freed to dream fiercely of different possibilities” (p. 17).

Korean American literature often invokes *han* thematically as an expression both of the experience of perpetual foreignness as well as the psychic impact of Korean history on individual lives. In *Re Jane* by Patricia Park (2015:242–243), the main character Jane frequently invokes *han* as integral to her experience of life as a Korean orphan and misfit in America: “My *han*. It was always the first emotion that leaped from my gut and licked the back of my throat, although life . . . had taught me to swallow it back down.” She describes it as “utterly untranslatable . . . a fiery anguish roiling in the blood, the result of being wronged” (p. 229). *Re Jane* grapples with issues of identity, race, and culture from transnational and trans-historical perspectives, and *han* seems to encapsulate these struggles as a failure to translate her identity into any culture, whether American or Korean.

There are similar themes in Jane Jeong Trenka's memoir, *The Language of Blood* (2005). Trenka describes the painful experience of being a Korean adoptee in white America, where her American family unconsciously imposes a strict management of her affect. In a domestic sphere in which racial difference and the racial past remain unaffirmed by those closest to her, Trenka feels *han* all the more deeply:

What were my parents to know of the inescapable voice of generational memory, of racial memory, of landscape—if they had never been separated from their own people? . . . They did not know this emotion or the word for it—*han*—but nevertheless it climbed from the other side of the earth, through the bottoms of her feet, through her legs and body like the columns of a building, and was crystallized in sadness at an impasse in the throat, where a new and forgetful life became a tourniquet. (pp. 237–238)

Trenka elegiacally biologizes *han* in her attempt to express her profound experience of alienation, likening it to an inescapable blood-based inheritance that she was born with:

I absorbed things from you while in your womb, Umma. How else can I explain it? . . . Through the amniotic fluid and the faint light coming through the walls of your belly, I understood the brute emotions of fear and hunger. I absorbed them, made them part of my body, made them part of my life's fabric. (pp. 187–188)

Trenka felt that she absorbed both the sense of Korea as her homeland as well as the collective *han* of the Korean people involuntarily from her mother's womb, and that her place in the United States will always be that of an outsider.

In Nora Okja Keller's *Comfort Woman* (1997), the Korean American protagonist, Beccah, listens to a tape her mother Akiko had recorded for her as a last message before she died. As a girl, Akiko had been sold into prostitution for the Japanese Imperial Army as a "comfort woman." She escaped and was taken in by American missionaries, one of whom married her and took her to the United States. Upon her first hearing of the tape, Beccah can only understand a few words: "I scribbled words I recognized—*kok, han, chesa, chudang, Saja, poji*"³ (p. 192). This scene highlights the multiple layers of othering that Beccah comes up against in her apprehension—apprehension in both the sense of "anxiety regarding," as well as "understanding"—of her mother. Akiko speaks a language that is other and struggles in the dominant tongue. Beccah not only feels the effects of this linguistic barrier whenever her childhood friends mocked Akiko's accent, but also whenever she cannot understand the full extent of Akiko's speech. It is noteworthy that the words she does understand, which include *han* among them, are all connected to blood and death. These moments, in which Beccah struggles with her mother's other language, is an example of what Rey Chow (2014) calls "linguaging as a postcolonial experience." There is a relationship between language and the racial objectification of Akiko, which then becomes important in Beccah's own racial subjectivization as an Asian American. The experience of these Korean American

characters with the idea of *han* is a picture of the lingering historical, post-colonial experience of being caught among unequal languages. Chow calls this the “lingualepidermal” link, challenging us to remember that language can be used not only for building one’s own personal identity but also for injuring or destroying the identity of others.

Having laid out how *han* originated as a social construct that racialized Koreans in the service of legitimizing colonial domination, and how it was co-opted and translated into Korean ethnonationalistic cultural and political discourses, what does tracing its afterlives in both Korea and the Korean diaspora reveal about what it actually represents today? Is it simply a social construct, or has it come to represent something that Koreans alone experience?

On the Koreanness of *Han*

This essay has shown already the widespread tendency to claim that *han* is uniquely Korean. There also have been claims, however, that *han* is *not* uniquely Korean. Hellen Moon (2014:420), for example, suggests that *han* “is transcultural, intercultural, and extant in all human communities.” She claims that it is not the uniqueness of *han* that makes it untranslatable, but the unique experience of suffering that in and of itself is always untranslatable, and that melancholy marks any colonial and postcolonial context (p. 432; see also Lee, 2002; Chung, 2005; and Joh, 2006 for other examples of this type of argument).

I would like to suggest that there is truth in both claims. *Han* is an affect, a habit, a practice, and an imaginary based within the sounds and scripts of colonial and postcolonial historical experience. Such historical experiences are not unique to Korea, and the affect that *han* analogically indexes is one that is experienced by multiple groups around the world. Richard Wright (1964:79, as cited in Cheng, 2001:14) once wrote a description of African Americans that sounds uncannily like Korean *han*: “most Negroes had embedded in their flesh and bones some peculiar propensity towards lamenting and complaining.” One journalist suggests that “an entire genre of American music arguably coalesced around the notion [of *han*]: the Blues, sung by African-Americans in the Deep South” (Volle, 2015).

Han has been invoked in contexts of interracial solidarity by Korean American and non-Korean American academics and blogger activists alike, following tragic events like the Rodney King upheaval (Kim, 1993), the Trayvon Martin case (Ellis, 2013), Freddie Gray’s death (Dominick,

2015), and Ferguson (Jung, 2014). In all these situations, *han* is described as a collective sense of grief in the face of injustice that both Korean Americans and African Americans have experienced in different ways. The *Huffington Post* even discusses the idea of *han* in its analysis of international Korean pop star Psy's collaboration with Snoop Dogg in the song "Hangover"; the journalist invokes *han* as the lynchpin from which to suggest that the collaboration "could be understood as a metaphor for African American and Asian American relations" (Kim, 2014).

Han is certainly more obviously central to the song "Hood," a collaboration between Korean rapper Tablo and African American hip-hop artist Joey Bada\$\$\$. Tablo begins the song declaring, "Where I'm from / *han* is the name we gave to struggle and pain / This river runs through our city like it runs through our veins / To us it's the one thing above all things." Playing with Korean homonyms, *han* not only is the name of "our struggle and pain" but also the name of the main river than runs through Seoul. He also plays on Korean words and their homonyms in English: "And that's that shit right there, what you call 'Soul' is a city right here / From Hongdae to Bedstuy / we're born from the same pain, shed alike tears, yeah." He declares the city of Seoul a city of "soul," with "soul" here invoking a meaning and usage historically used to indicate "the emotional or spiritual quality of African American life and culture, especially as manifested in music" (*OED*, "soul," definition 3c). The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces this particular meaning's origins to references describing late 1940s Black jazz. In just a couple of words, this lyrical move suddenly aligns Korean and Black experiences and cultures.

The song is about the struggle to make money in different parts of the world. From the point of view of Korean *han*, making money is experienced as a win or lose situation: "For the money, we fight, fall but overcome, that's why we call it 'won.'" Tablo plays with the English homonym of the Korean word "won," which indicates the Korean currency at the same time that it is the past tense of the English word "win." He paints images of his mother (*öm-ma*) and father (*a-ppa*) struggling to get food on the table and working graveyard shifts—images that could just as easily be seen from "Hongdae to Bedstuy," neighborhoods in Seoul and Brooklyn, respectively. Koreans and Blacks are "born from the same pain, shed alike tears," referring to the transmission of *han* across generations and in different cultures. The song ends with the refrain, this time with Joey Bada\$\$'s voice layered beneath Tablo's. Together they chant: "And that's that shit right there, what you call 'Soul' is a city right here / From Hongdae to Bedstuy, we're born from the same pain, shed alike tears, yeah / Some call it pain, we call it *sarang* man / Middle finger to

the hate and the broken minds that can't relate." When Tablo and Joey Bada\$\$ say these lyrics together, the threads of the song that hint at the common experience of *han* for Koreans and Blacks weave together at the lines "some call it pain, we call it *sarang*." *Sarang* is the Korean word for love. Their experience of *han* opens into a brotherly love that takes a stand against "haters" and "broken minds that can't relate."

Tablo's song illustrates how "racial wounds" can be inherited across time and even across racial groups. In *The Melancholy of Race* (2001:x), Anne Anlin Cheng asserts that "the social and subjective formations of the so-called racialized or minority subject are intimately tied to the psychological experience of grief." *Han* is not just a social construct; it names an embodied experience of shared grief. While Cheng focuses on how racial melancholia helps us comprehend aspects of American racial culture, here I adapt her work in American studies to a broader transnational scope. Following Cheng's framework, the Korean American position would be the racial other whom white culture contradictorily rejects at the same time that it attaches to it. This leaves the racial other in a suspended position of paradox (p. xi). I would add that the Korean diasporic position of paradoxical suspension is further complicated and aggravated by its position as a racial other with an "other" racialized history that haunts it. That "other" history itself has made a trans-Pacific crossing from a nation that has its own form of racial melancholia; Korea may not be white-dominant, but it has been beset with persistent collective traumas from both within and without that have produced forms of racial grief and loss, of which I believe *han* is one exemplar.

Cheng's psychoanalytic model of melancholia also helps us understand *han* not only as a symptom, but also as a "dynamic process with both coercive and transformative potentials for a political imagination" (p. xi). Cheng points out that, while much energy has been devoted to deconstructing categories such as gender and race, much less attention has been directed toward the ways in which individuals and communities "remain invested in maintaining such categories, even when such identities prove to be prohibitive or debilitating" (p. 7). Jenny Wills (2016) makes a similar point when, from the perspective of adoption studies, she problematizes the ubiquitous tendency of scholars to dismiss any phenomenon that is essentialist. The dominant predisposition of everyday people to fixate on origins and biological understandings of self is in itself worth critical examination. Wills argues that this typical academic "anti-essentialist" posture is enabled by "an invisible privileging of certain bodies in certain atmospheres of power" (p. 204). Her point is that the discourse of anti-essentialism has its own elitist blind spot: it assumes a neutral, default

subject for whom “ancestry and origins are both coherent and reliable” (p. 204). Regarding *han*, the anti-essentialist perhaps would assert that we should work to erase the word from everyday language because it only perpetuates racial stereotypes. I do agree that essentialist notions of *han* are harmful; we have seen how uncritical, essentialist uses of *han* can work to maintain racial othering, systemic injustices, and state power. However I argue that a *critical han* is different.

Critical Han

Han is not uniquely Korean as an affect of postcolonial sorrow and mourning. Neither is *han* uniquely Korean in the sense of racial or biological essence. However I argue that a *critical han* must recognize how *han* is also absolutely uniquely Korean: it is a Korean word in which its current usage is a postcolonial translation of a Japanese colonial construct. *Critical han* aims to repeatedly emphasize how the term itself is embedded in a specific history that *we should not forget*. The word *han* carries within it a history of unmitigated collective traumas in Korea, which have created a very specific social and national imaginary in Korea and Korean diasporas.

While *han* is not transmitted by mechanisms of blood inheritance, it is still evidently transmitted through generations and collectively. Teresa Brennan, in *The Transmission of Affect* (2004), shows how the emotions and affects of one person or group can be absorbed by another. Her research demonstrates the ability to borrow or share states of mind through affective transfer based on constant interaction between individuals and their physical, social, and cultural milieus. Brennan defines feelings “as sensations that have found the right match in words” (p. 5). *Han* is the word for sorrow in reaction to historical injustice against those who identify as Korean. *Han* is an example of how history becomes internalized in individuals while at the same time creating horizontal connections of empathy and identification. For Brennan, affects are “in the flesh” and manifest themselves as sensations as well as thoughts. Affects can pass through the atmosphere of a place from one body to another, psychic incursions that weaken the boundary of the self. Brennan’s theory is a multidimensional and interactive model of subjectivity that describes how *han* can be transmitted among individuals within Korean society, where phenotypical racialized resemblance synergizes with historical grief to produce a racial sense of affect.

At the same time, affect theory also applies in the context of diaspora, where *han* passes through the atmospheres of kinship structures (whether

biological or adoptive, via positive or negative influences) and in interaction with a sociocultural and political milieu that largely alienates them. Diasporas carve out, as David Eng (2010:16) argues, “other psychic pathways of displacement and affiliation, by demarcating alternative material structures and psychic formations that demand a new language for family and kinship.” *Han* is one such pathway of psychic formation that shows our need to move beyond structuralist accounts of kinship that emphasize the Oedipus complex as the primary psychic structure regulating the emergence of the social. *Han* emerges differently in postcolonial/neocolonial Korea and Korean diasporas as the exigencies of identity embedded in a history of persistent collective traumas influence ideas of kinship, nation, and race. The interethnic discourse of *han* is an example of how racial identification can be an expression of mourning and solidarity, even as it continues to evolve from its origin as a biologicistic racial colonial construct. *Critical han* is one nexus in which we see how collective grief can play a constitutive role in transnational racial-ethnic subject formations.

Although the current meaning of *han* certainly originated as a colonial construct of the Korean “beauty of sorrow,” I argue that today it is an affect that encapsulates the grief of historical memory—the memory of past collective trauma—and that renders itself racialized/ethnicized and attached to the imagined community of nation. The “beauty of sorrow” was a construct imposed on Koreans, but its translation into *han* described then and describes now an actual affect that is an experience of history. Even though *han*, let alone race itself, are social constructs, *critical han* turns a magnifying glass on to the ways in which race and racial difference continue to saturate our material and psychic lives.

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Notes

1. I agree with a small subset of writers and scholars who have suggested that its current usage and meaning has colonial origins, though none have developed the theory fully. Heather Willoughby (2000), Andrew Killick (2010), Michael Breen (2004), Hwajoon

Joo (2008), and Sunghee Choi (2011) mention only briefly the possibility that *han* has more recent origins than is commonly assumed. The most thorough treatment of this topic in English is a more niche Christian pastoral care approach by theologian Hellen Moon (2014). Moon problematizes the essentialist application of the concept of *han* in the discourse of Korean liberation theology, arguing that it “conveys the opinions of the Japanese colonialists about Korean subjects during the colonial period” (p. 420). Moon maintains that accepting *han* is the equivalent of reinforcing colonialist opinions about colonized subjects. While Moon’s piece inspired some of the research questions that led to this article, my focus here is transcultural Korean studies and my conclusions are not the same.

2. I too have had this experience. When I was a college student visiting Korea for a summer “cultural immersion” program in 1998, an art history professor likewise taught us that traditional Korean white porcelain ceramics embodied the essence of *han*. I was also taught that the source of *han* was Korea’s position as a vulnerable peninsula, which purportedly has subjected it to a long history of foreign invasions and colonization.

3. *kok*: wailing; *chesa*: ancestral rites; *chudang*: evil spirit; *Saja*: Death messenger; *pojji*: “pussy” (obscenity).

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