

# CROSS-CURRENTS



## EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

### **Against the Nihilism of Suffering and Death: Richard E. K. Kim and His Works**

Jooyeon Rhee, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

#### **Abstract**

This article examines the life and works of Richard E. K. Kim (1932–2009), a first-generation Korean diasporic writer in the United States. It focuses on how Kim struggled to overcome the nihilism of suffering and death that derived from colonialism and the Korean War through his literary works. Kim witnessed firsthand these two major historical events, which caused irrevocable psychological and physical damage to many people of his generation. In his autobiographical fiction, he conveys painful memories of the events by reviving the voices of people in that era. What his works offer us goes beyond vivid memories of the past, however; they also present the power of forgiveness as a condition to overcome the nihilism of suffering and death. Remembrance and forgiveness are, therefore, two major thematic pillars of his works that enable us to connect to these difficult and traumatic times. These themes are portrayed in such a gripping way mainly because Kim tried to maintain a certain distance—an emotional and linguistic distance—from the familiar, in order to elucidate the reality of the human condition: an ontological position of the exile from which he produced his works. This article argues that Kim's works provide us the possibility to transcend the nihilism of historical trauma through articulating the meaning of remembrance and forgiveness from his self-assumed position of exile.

Keywords: Richard E. K. Kim, diasporic writer, *Lost Names*, *The Martyred*, *Searching for Lost Times*, Japanese colonialism, Korean War, remembrance, forgiveness

#### **Introduction: Richard E. K. Kim and His Exile Identity**

All I do is write and live, which can be done anywhere. It is not important whether I live in Korea or America. Kafka is still Kafka no matter where he had lived.... I used to have nostalgia [about my homeland] but even that has disappeared now.... Who knows, I may regain nostalgia if the orchard in Hwanghae province can be revived and I have a chance to live there once again. I had lost many things. (R. Kim 1985, 273)

When interviewed by the South Korean writer Kang Sökkyöng in 1985, Richard E. K. Kim stated that he had lost nostalgia for his home country—and yet memories of his homeland dominate his fictional works and essays. Born in 1932, Kim lived through a tumultuous time in modern Korean history, experiencing both the Japanese colonization of Korea and the Korean War. Shortly after the Korean War, during which he served the Army of the Republic of Korea as a liaison officer, Kim left for the United States. Although he had lived in the United States since 1954—over three decades by the time of the interview—it seems that he had found no place where he could fully settle. As he stated, his life was like that of a nomad (*yurangmin*), wandering around many places without feeling rooted: “It is like I have been carrying a bundle [*bottari*] here and there” (R. Kim 1985, 128).

In fact, nostalgia is not a keyword that characterizes Kim’s writing. In his three autobiographical works, he explores the meaning of remembrance and forgiveness that revolve around his direct experience of the two traumatic historical events. The process of retrieving the past is a way for him to fight against the “tyranny of History” that “crushes and destroys smaller histories” (R. Kim 1998, xv). By “smaller histories,” he refers to the stories of individuals and communities that are often effaced from hegemonic knowledge production about human history. Writing, for Kim, was a process of bringing back these histories and coming to terms with suffering through contemplating the possibility of forgiveness.

Beginning with his first work, *The Martyred* ([1964] 2011), Kim repeatedly questioned the possibility of vengeance, the powerful human desire to bring justice to those who suffered and died during the colonial period and the Korean War. The best vengeance, he concluded, “is not to fall into nihilism” (R. Kim 1985, 75). Kim, like Camus, sought ways to “move beyond nihilism by embracing and transcending the many enigmas portrayed in *The Martyred*” (Fenkl [1964] 2011, xxvi). Kim indeed dedicated *The Martyred* to Albert Camus for Kim’s own overcoming of “the nihilism of the trenches and bunkers of Korea” ([1964] 2011). The will to counter the nihilism of suffering and death is evident in Kim’s works.

Writing about Korean history may have placed a burden of representation on Richard Kim by stressing his ethnic identity over his identity as a writer.<sup>1</sup> I sense that Kim was well aware of the dilemma in writing about historical facts and memories of his culture of origin while in the United States. Furthermore, his choice to address readers in his third language complicated the dimension of his exile identity. Kim’s mother tongue was Korean, but he grew

up learning Japanese as his national language, and he wrote in English. The choice of his written language, I believe, had nothing to do with his intended readership. It was certainly not an act of “vengeance” on the colonizer, as demonstrated by some Korean diasporic writers who have enacted violence against the imperial language by destroying or deconstructing certain aesthetics or grammar in order to delineate the violence done to colonized people.<sup>2</sup> Kim’s linguistic choice can be understood instead as a distancing strategy, moving away from the familiar in order to get close to the core of the human condition he wished to articulate.

In this sense, Kim’s text reveals its worldliness, to borrow Edward Said’s observation, for it “opposes monocentrism, which licenses a culture to cloak itself in the particular authority of certain values over others” (Said [1975] 2009, 281). For Kim, writing was “the proof of life...to see a light, a glimmer, however faint, of the proof of life in the ashen twilight years of our past lives—so that the proof of life, of the living, will triumph over the withering negation of life, the dead...” (R. Kim 1998, xvii). Kim’s linguistic and existential dilemma may have placed him in the discomfort zone of exile. However, it was through this zone of exile identity that he led us to rethink the meaningful connection between self and others.

Kim was among the first generation of Korean diasporic writers in the United States whose works gained acclaim in the 1960s and 1970s. Although his works have been discussed by scholars of diaspora and diasporic literature, no significant attention has been given to Kim in the English-speaking world so far. South Korean interest in Kim has subsided since the late 1980s, as he published no new work since his last non-fiction book, *In Search of Koreans in China and the Soviet Union* (1989) was published in Seoul. Only a handful of scholars have discussed his works, though the first monograph on Kim and his works was published recently.<sup>3</sup>

Kim deserves closer attention because his literary exploration of historical memories presents us with a meaningful connection across generations as well as geographical and cultural boundaries. This article highlights the literary achievements a Korean diasporic writer made by focusing on the theme of remembrance and forgiveness, which enables us to think critically about the meaning of belonging through compassionate stories from the past. I first trace Kim’s exile identity in his handling of childhood memory and then explore the theme of remembrance and forgiveness as a condition to negate the nihilism of suffering and death. Emphasis is given to two novels, *The Martyred* and *Lost Names*, while the novel *The Innocent* (1968) and a collection of essays, *Searching for Lost Times* (1985), are also referred to throughout.

## The Memory of the First Exile and Displacement

It is noteworthy that it was only after Kim was displaced from his homeland, both geographically and culturally, that his contemplation of “small histories” of people began to manifest in literary forms. Just as the state of homelessness became an intellectual ground on which Edward Said explored modern culture, Kim’s life as an exile provided him with a creative space in which his literary exploration of historical memories was fostered.<sup>4</sup> This positive effect of being an exile is not initially calculated but is formed as one struggles to move oneself out of the familiar while searching for a space to express the struggle.<sup>5</sup> If Kim had not left Korea, he stated, it would not have been possible for him to write a novel like *The Martyred* (cited in Kim W. 2007a, 117): a telling confession that provides us with an important clue for understanding the many layered meanings of simultaneously living and not living in two cultures. The first chapter of *Lost Names* features the exile of an infant boy, “I”—the beginning of Kim’s and his protagonist’s experience of displacement.

In this chapter, the mother of the infant “I” recalls crossing the Korea-Manchuria border in 1933. The young mother, with her son in her arms, has boarded a train heading to Manchuria. After her husband is pulled out of the train by the Japanese military police for questioning, she gets off the train and waits on the platform for her husband’s return. Many hours pass, and with her baby in her arms she stands still in the train station. The afternoon sunlight gradually disappears and by the time her husband safely returns—with several welts on his face—it is dark. The family cannot spare more time at the border waiting for the next train, so they set out to cross the border on foot. The three figures in the winter landscape are immersed in a crowd of Korean people in white clothing who have been ousted from their homeland due to poverty, mistreatment, and injustice.

What appears to be the mother’s recollection of the memory soon becomes unreliable, as the narrative shifts between her telling the story and “I” remembering the scene. It seems that the mother speaks directly to “I,” who is by now mature enough to understand the complexity of his mother’s external and internal struggle to keep the family together—this fact is only revealed at the end of the chapter. However, the infant “I” participates in the recollection with full consciousness: he remembers how hungry and thirsty he was when he was buried in his mother’s bosom and what he saw that night when crossing the frozen Tuman River. In other words, the

infant “I” and the adult “I” are telling the story together as the mother leads them both to specific locations and events.

One of the most striking images the infant “I” recalls is that of the family and fellow Koreans crossing the frozen river at night: “With all the snow under the starry sky, the air is strangely white. People move on like ghosts, silently, except for their feet crunching on the ice” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 17). The people’s endurance of cold and hunger and the fear of falling through the cracked ice is reflected in the sound of the ice being crushed under their feet. The border crossing and people’s movement in silence is recalled through the mother’s and the infant son’s storytelling, which at times are blended in a description of a single scene. It is unclear whether the novel is written from a first-person or a third-person perspective, especially when “I” is just an infant. This blurring perspective offers a clue as to why Kim refused to let his novel be read as autobiographical. He argued:

Everything in the book actually happened. It happened to me. So why am I always insisting it’s not autobiographical? I think because of the way I used the things that actually happened. You have to arrange them, mix them up. Above all, it’s interpretation of facts, of factual events—some thirty or forty years later.... I like to separate the actual events from the emotional, the psychological. (R. Kim [1970] 1998, xxx)

Kim was criticized for presenting inaccurate descriptions of historical facts in *Lost Names* as well as in two of his other novels. He in turn acknowledged that some of the events in *Lost Names* could have not happened in reality (W. Kim 2007b, 44).<sup>6</sup> Autobiographical elements are apparent in his novels, and yet their accuracy was not as important to Kim as recounting his memories of events in order to articulate the emotional and psychological dimensions of those memories. Kim prioritized the interpretation of emotional and psychological facts, and this leads us to understand why the written object “I” in *Lost Names* must not be confused with the writing subject: we need to separate biographical facts from the author when interpreting his texts, as Roland Barthes ([1967] 1978) argued.

It is worth revisiting Barthes’s observations of the relationship between the writing subject and its texts. In his “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” ([1970] 1998), Barthes argued that “to write” is “to make oneself the center of the action of speech,” and yet when “I” reaches its destination, it is “received by my interlocutors as a stable sign, product of a complete code,

whose contents are recurrent. In other words, the *I* of the one who writes is not the same as the *I* who is read by you” ([1970] 1998, 17). The writing subject’s desire “to be read” is evident in autobiography or fiction that is ascribed with autobiographical elements. The “I” who is read, then, is at the center of the text, while the “I” who writes is outside the text, indicating that the writing subject (i.e., the author) is “not only writing the self ‘absolutely’ but preparing that self to be read absolutely” (Rankin 1999, 308). The “we” that the “I” refers to in Kim’s work, however, is not limited to Koreans who share historical memories, but to all those who understand the emotional and spiritual dimensions of displacement. The intimate distance between the writer and his reader, then, is a literary tool to give the reader freedom to interpret the “facts.”

It seems significant that the protagonist’s first experience of exile had to be traced, a record of his family and his “people” who had to cross the frozen Tuman River, expelled from their own land. By borrowing the mother’s memory, the “I” narrates the scene of expulsion:

She goes behind him. Many people are behind her. No one is talking much. The path has been made by lots of footsteps that packed the snow hard.... Forced out of their land and their homes by the Japanese, who are buying up land cheaply by threat and coercion. Displaced peasants driven out of their ancestral land to find new roots in an alien land. What fate is waiting for these people across the river? What destiny will unfold for her and her family across the river? (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 17)

The narrator does not tell us about his or his family’s life in Manchuria, except to describe a farewell party at his school in Manchuria before his departure for Korea.<sup>7</sup> What this first chapter offers us instead is a representation of the reality the community faces, not the solitary figure of “I” or his family. This is the moment when he experiences his first exile—not as a solitary figure but as part of a people linked by a shared destiny. Although the protagonist does not travel outside the Korean peninsula again after returning from Manchuria to his parents’ hometown, this chapter lets the reader know that “I” in fact crossed the “border...many times” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 20–21) since the first crossing. How many times and why such crossings were made are not explained in the book, but the hero’s attempt to restore the memory of his first crossing serves its purpose by conveying the emotional impact of the displacement, manifested in the quiet sound of footsteps “crunching on the ice” that are left on the thick snow by the ghostly figures of Koreans.

When Kim spent considerable time in Korea in the 1980s, first as a Fulbright scholar between 1982 and 1984 and later as a translator and publisher of English literature (Kim W. 2007a, 100–104), his work largely focused on tracing the lives of Korean diasporic subjects in China and the Soviet Union. In Seoul, he scripted a television documentary, *In Search of Koreans in China and the Soviet Union* (1989); he also published a photo essay with the same title in the same year. He may have moved back to Korea in the early 1980s in order to further search for the meaning of ethnic identity there. In the foreword of the Korean translation of *The Innocent* (1968), he noted that the novel was a record of one human being who tries to understand a world full of problems, a quest that resonated with his own desire to fully understand himself first in order to understand the world (cited in Kim W. 2007b, 32).

Kim made a similar statement in his photo essay about Koreans in China and the Soviet Union, the place where he “came to understand the meaning of *us* through discovering my selfhood” (“Chung-so hanin silsang p’ot’o eseiro” 1989). The circular physical movement of his journey, in other words, points to the initial inquiry about his exile identity, his questioning of his position as a writer, and the role of his writing after the experience of displacement. In a way, he was tracing his own history of displacement through his journey to China, the country in which the first memory of the child in *Lost Names* was made: the first memory of being an exile wherein the sense of loss and love converged.

### **Against Suffering (*Han*) and Death**

Unlike the first generation of the Korean diaspora, whose crossing of national boundaries might have felt like a permanent loss of homeland, later generations of the Korean diaspora and recent Korean migrants dwell in a different environment. With the advance of transportation and media technologies, along with the increasingly transnational mobility of capital, their imagination of Korea is not locked into the rigid notion of migration. Once regarded as a “unidirectional or final” journey, migration has transformed into a process of multiple or circular movements across transnational spaces in the last few decades (Lie 1995, 304). Also, the national and linguistic sameness in the Korean diaspora’s “homeland” is no longer a determinant for their affiliation with it. In these increasingly transnational economic and cultural contexts, later generations of migrants are freer from the burden of national history so ubiquitous to the first generation.

However, the cosmopolitan and transnational living environment does not guarantee liberation from marginalization. The physical and psychological damages done to Korean Americans during the 1992 Los Angeles riots<sup>8</sup> are not something from a distant past, and the sense of vulnerability derived from racialized politics in everyday life manifests in various forms, at times violently. Although the later generations of the Korean diaspora may carry a much lighter burden of national history than the first generations, they cannot easily separate their “Koreanness” from Korean history—not just because that history produced their displacement, but because it is something they inevitably refer to when defining their ethnic identity in the United States.

In her discussion of literal and figurative imaginations of “postmemory *han*”—“a nonconsensual descent relation, a descent relation represented as being so powerful that it persists regardless of whether the parent (or child) consents to it” (Chu 2008, 102)—Seo-Young Chu, a scholar of English literature, raises a critical question as to how second-generation Korean Americans empathize with the first generation’s direct historical experience of colonialism and the Korean War. She finds that a work of fiction like *Lost Names* evokes the power of imagining such experiences that is embodied in the Korean word *han*, a culturally bound concept of collective and individual suffering. *Han* has been associated with Korean people’s suffering during the colonial period and the Korean War, and there is no shortage of literary and cinematic works in Korea that stress this suffering. South Korean novelist Hwang Sögyöng’s *The Guest* (2001), for example, features violent conflicts among Koreans and their problematic relationship with Christianity—conflicts of a similar nature to that depicted in *The Martyred*. While the themes of reconciliation and forgiveness are common to both works, what separates the two is the refusal of *han* in Kim’s work, whereas Hwang stresses *han* as a powerful cultural sentiment that binds all people.

I agree with Chu that diasporic literature plays a role in the formation of empathy through conveying the particular experience—suffering—that runs across different generations. However, I would add that its emotive power extends far beyond Korean American communities. Many later generations of Korean American writers have produced inspiring novels that deal with modern Korean history, mainly focusing on Japanese colonialism and the Korean War.<sup>9</sup> And yet the experience of suffering caused by the violence of colonial rule and war is not shared solely among first-general Korean immigrants, but has also been endured by many others.

Richard E. K. Kim adamantly refused to accept *han* as a Korean-specific cultural sentiment—he believed that it embodies a self-defeating notion of fate. Instead, he valued the idea that free will determines the course of one’s life. The question of free will is woven into Kim’s portrayal of the role of Christianity for people who are suffering in all of his fiction. He once said that Christianity is a “universal religion” because of “the free will given to humanity by God to choose either the path of evil or good” (R. Kim 1985, 260). God, as far as Kim is concerned, offers no help for those who suffer. As the protagonist in *The Martyred*, Captain Lee, says to a priest, God does not seem to be aware of “suffering of his people” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 18): it is people’s free will to inflict pain on themselves and fight off suffering, he seems to suggest.

The juxtaposition of fate and free will is undoubtedly noticeable in *The Martyred*, which depicts an intense confrontation between those who wish to believe that the twelve priests are martyrs and those who try to refute their martyrdom. The protagonist in the novel, a South Korean officer named Captain Lee, is given the task of investigating the contradicting stories about the final moment of the priests: the South Korean army publicizes that the priests were murdered by the North Korean secret police for keeping their religious faith, while the North Korean police ridicule the priests for abandoning their faith before the death threat imposed on by the police themselves. The two sides are divided by different ideologies, and they are fully aware of their act of “manufacturing” a truth for their own benefit. The only person who knows the true account of the story of the twelve dead priests is the priest Shin, who told his congregation a lie that the other priests died as martyrs; in truth, there was a traitor among the priests and most of them died in disgrace. The lie, as Chaplain Koh denounces, is “blasphemy” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 91). Chaplain Koh tries to reveal the truth because “he couldn’t take any more of the idiotic notion of meek suffering and false pride of these North Korean Christians.... They are sick; they are still paralyzed by the spiritual disease” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 48).

What shocks Captain Lee more is not the lie itself but Priest Shin’s denial of God: “All my life I have searched for God, Captain,” Shin whispers, “but I found only man with all his sufferings...and death, inexorable death!” “And after death?” “Nothing!” he whispers. “Nothing” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 160). Captain Lee asks Priest Shin why, then, he lied to his people? Shin replies that it is important for him to carry the message people want to hear—that is, that the eternal Kingdom of God awaits them: an illusion of hope that cures the disease of despair. He

continues, “We must not let the sickness of despair corrupt the life of man and reduce him to a mere scarecrow” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 160). Shin, in other words, chooses to plant an illusion of faith as a way to help people fight against nihilism.

While *The Martyred* was received with much enthusiasm in the United States, remaining a best seller for twenty weeks in a row, its reception in South Korea was unfavorable. Korean Christian communities in particular were hostile to Kim, labeling him a “traitor” for the book’s negative depiction of Christians (Kim W. 2007a, 78). The communities even demanded that the government ban the screening of the film adaptation of *The Martyred* directed by Yu Hyönmok in 1965, though to no avail. As far as I know, Kim did not respond to the Christian communities’ reactions, but perhaps his response was already given in the novel when he distinguished history from faith, foreseeing the never-ending conflict between the two. He wrote, “How long, I wondered, how long will the people listen to the voices whispering to them, one from within history, the other from far beyond history, each promising them salvation and justice, each asking them to pledge themselves to its promise?” (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 198). And he did not abandon his belief in “the salvation of man by man here and now” (R. Kim 1968, 7) in his next work, *The Innocent*, though the work did not receive the same level of enthusiasm as *The Martyred* did.<sup>10</sup>

Kim regained fame with his third work, *Lost Names*, in which he portrayed the development of “a strange form of love” (R. Kim [1964] 2011) over time among family members and people in their town, unfolding a masterly exploration of this “love” that helps to familiarize us with its “strangeness” in a compelling way. After the narrator, “I,” returns to Korea, the book tells the story of his relationships with his school friends, family, and community. “I” first feels alien in his homeland, sensing that he has been “uprooted once again and transplanted into what was once ours but is no longer—alien land that is not an alien land” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 37). But soon he mingles with friends at school and develops friendships. And yet he has come back at the darkest time of the colonial period, when the colonial government’s pressure on people to sacrifice themselves for the Japanese empire is manifest in material forms. Beatings are common at his school, and the state frequently confiscates food and other resources from Korean households, threatening peoples’ livelihoods. The highlight of this oppression is seen in the chapter “Lost Names,” in which the boy “I” observes adults’ response

to the state's imposition of the "changing name policy" (*ch'angssi kaemyōng*), which forced Koreans to take Japanese names.

On a cold day, all the adults—men and women, young and old—from the whole clan have gathered to visit their ancestors' graves after their new names have been registered. The shame they feel over their failure to keep their names turns into bitter awareness of their powerless state. Like the snow falling from the sky, their mourning robes are white, and they bemoan the loss of their names, their country, and their future. The boy observes:

I watch the people everywhere, all those indistinct figures engulfed in the slashing snow, frozen still, like lifeless statuettes.... I am dizzy with a sweet, tantalizing temptation to stamp my feet, scratch and tear at everything I can lay my hands on, and scream out to everyone in sight to stop—*Stop! Please stop!*—stop crying and weeping and sobbing and wailing and chanting.... Their pitifulness, their weakness, their self-lacerating lamentation for their ruin and their misfortune repulse me and infuriate me.... How long—for how many generations—are you going to say to each other, "I am ashamed to look in your eyes"? Is that going to be the only legacy we can hand down to the next generation and the next and the next? "Oh, we are ruined!" Ha! What is the matter with you all, you grown-ups! All this whining, wailing, chanting, bowing to the graves, sorrowful silence, meaningful looks, burning tears...that is not going to save you from having to cry out, "Oh, ruination!" (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 113)

This image of grieving people evokes a powerful emotion in the narrator. Kim explained that "nothing really happens to a person except as it is registered in the subconsciousness" and that the description above was written "to give life to that which had been registered" [to the boy] (R. Kim [1970] 1998, xviii). The event is deeply engraved in the boy's memory, and yet the way he feels about the "shameful" occasion is a bit distant from the feelings of grief, hatred, and anger that are described by the adults in the scene. In the eyes of the boy, the sorrow-laden drama of the confrontation between the dead and the living is more pitiful than the fact that they have all lost their names. The collective sense of shame, before their ancestors and before the next generation, is not the legacy that he wishes to be handed down by the old generation: a sense of nihilism parallels the dead with the living, the eternal death the boy refuses to accept.

The child's observation of the living who are grieving before their ancestors' graves is a manifestation of *han* that Kim vehemently refuses to accept: "*Han*—I realized—had made Koreans pliant before foreign powers and domination, subservient to foreign interests, and obsessed, masochistically and degradingly, with a petty, private, and baser instinct for only one's

survival” (R. Kim 1998, xv). The living beings stand before the graves like ghosts because they have abandoned their reason for living. The fact that they let the sadness devour them is a sign of moral defeat, an abandonment of hope deeply grounded in the *han* that Kim denounces.

By refusing to be engulfed in *han*, the child, it appears, becomes a rebel, who “does not ask for life, but for reasons for living” (Camus 1991, 101). Albert Camus observed that a rebel’s will to negate death leads the rebel to experience a “disenchanted religious experience” (1991, 101). The “religious experience” is a philosophical one, as Camus explained it, which comes only after the rebel realizes that there is nothing noble about his rebellion but its purpose. Kim’s narrator tells us about his family’s Christian background in *Lost Names*. And yet the ways in which the religious dimension of enduring suffering is represented is not particularly Christian. As in Kim’s previous novel, *The Martyred*, the narrator cannot fully comprehend how Christianity serves him and his people, and at times it rather forces him to face his helplessness as a human being.

### **“Vengeance is God’s and Memories are Mine”: Remembrance and Forgiveness**

“I” is the only child who attends the pitiful name-changing ceremony, since his father takes him to witness the day. The father whispers to “I,” “Remember it. Don’t ever forget this day” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 106). Indeed, it is a day the boy will never forget, since he and his people lost their names, a painful reminder of their powerless state, which they do not wish the next generation to have to experience. The boy does not fully understand that he is becoming a rebel, but his father discovers a hope for the future through the boy’s rebellious reaction.

On their way to the ancestors’ graves, the narrator asks his father, “What does our new name mean, sir?” His father answers, “‘Foundation of Rock...on this rock I will build my church...’ I do not understand him” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 106). In fact, the new name the Kim family takes is Iwamoto, literally meaning “foundation of rock,” but resonating with a story from the Bible that specifically refers to Peter. After the narrator makes a scene at the graves, the father smiles at the boy and says, “Today, you, too, have made a small beginning” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 114). Considering the context in which the father’s statement is made, it seems that the father is willing to keep his hope for the future generation—while not forgetting the moment of humiliation and still remembering what they have lost. The father’s riddle, “a small beginning,” appears a number of times in the novel. The father will never say what it means, but it seems to

refer to a certain moment when a character makes an effort to face the truth of life without being fully conscious of doing so. The hero's will to rebel becomes more visible as he grows older and his religious beliefs are challenged on a number of occasions.

The kind of religious or philosophical awakening that "I" experiences in his search for the purpose of life is heightened in a scene in which he is beaten severely by a Japanese schoolteacher. The boy tries to overcome the pain by relying on religious teachings, to no avail:

Love and Compassion for sinners and evildoers.... Turn the other cheek, also....  
Be noble in suffering.... But that self-induced, masochistic euphoria—an  
illusion—does not last long. There is no nobility in pain; there is only degradation.  
And, now, every sensation within me is turning, with each blow, into a boundless  
contempt, and my contempt is burning into hatred, a hatred fierce and immense.  
(R. Kim [1970] 1998, 134)

This is one of two places in the novel where the boy refers to the Bible, and this is the moment when he realizes that there is no God who can save him from his suffering. The hero goes to church every Sunday with his family, and accounts of his mother's religious devotion appear a number of times. However, the Christian notions of compassion and forgiveness do not function as moral guidance for the hero's actions and feelings toward his environment. As the above lines indicate, that kind of compassion comes to the hero through his experience of real pain on his flesh and his discovery of deep hatred.

Though the beating, the pain on his flesh, and his humiliation are all things the hero will never forget, he still retains sympathy for the Japanese—yet this does not mean that he will “glory in magnanimity nor understanding nor forgiveness. I merely reflect, with a quick, sharp ache within me, that that is only one of the many other things that I cannot and will not forget.... ‘Vengeance is Mine,’ says a God. ‘Vengeance is Yours,’ I say, ‘Memories are Mine’” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 135). The book suggests the possibility of violence directed at the Japanese by Koreans immediately after liberation: Koreans run around the village in groups, tearing down signs and flags from Japanese shops and stores (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 165). There is no scene of physical violence brought on the Japanese, but Kim's description of the pitiful state of a Japanese Shinto priest and the narrator's Japanese schoolteacher shows that the danger of being attacked by Koreans is real enough.

Rather than taking part in these activities, the boy leaves the act of vengeance in God's hands after experiencing the beating. He tries to overcome his hatred, even attempting a gesture of sympathy after liberation with the Japanese settlers in Korea, who fear the possibility of Koreans taking violent revenge on them. This may have been a radical representation of the Japanese at the time of the work's publication; in writings produced by Koreans at this time the Japanese are almost always depicted as heartless oppressors. Perhaps Kim's representation of the Japanese was "unexpectedly sympathetic...a point of view entirely uncharacteristic of Korean writing" (Fenkl [1964] 2011, xvii). What needs to be addressed on the issue of "sympathy" toward the Japanese is the location where Kim wrote his novel: the United States. While anti-colonialism ran high and Japan-friendly writings were censored by the state in 1970 in South Korea, in the United States, Kim was freer to portray the scene without an ideological depiction of the Japanese.

However, there is something more going on in the boy's response to the Japanese that cannot be explained by sympathy alone. At the core of the boy's sympathetic gaze lies a heavy issue of forgiveness. It might be useful to reference Jacques Derrida's reflection of forgiveness in our approach to Kim's emotional reaction toward the Japanese here. In *On Forgiveness*, Derrida argued that the true meaning of forgiveness has been lost by politically calculated and staged gestures and languages of forgiveness and repentance. Some nation-states' conditional apologies and forgiveness illustrate his point. A recent example is the Korean government's failure to consult survivors of Japanese military sexual slavery. The government agreed to distribute funds from the Japanese government to the survivors by signing an agreement that both governments would no longer engage in the slavery issue on the state level. What is fundamentally wrong in such a case, to borrow from Derrida, is the impure motivation for the negotiations between the Japanese and the South Korean governments, both of which aimed at a condition of "normalisation" favorable to states but not to the victims (Derrida [1997] 2001, 31–32).<sup>11</sup>

Derrida thus asserted that the possibility of forgiveness must first recognize the impossibility of forgiveness, since "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable...one cannot, or should not, forgive...it [forgiveness] can only be possible in doing the impossible" ([1997] 2001, 32). If one is forgivable and his/her victim "forgives," according to Derrida, then the crime will be forgotten. Since a pure forgiveness cannot possibly be made, however, "negotiations" such as in the Japan/Korea case will only continue to evoke memories of the past. This does not mean

that, even if a pure forgiveness can be made for the unforgivable, the crime will be forgotten. On the contrary, the memories of crimes will never be forgotten by victims, since only victims have a right to forgive and at the same time are aware of the impossibility of forgiving the unforgivable.

In *Lost Names*, the boy's complicated response to the Japanese can be explained with Derrida's notion of forgiveness. The sympathetic description points to the boy's identification with the pain the Japanese faced based on his own painful experience, and yet he is aware of his limit in not forgiving them, because he is unwilling to forget how he and his people suffered at the hands of the aggressor. When the narrator discovers his schoolteacher in a labor camp in Pyongyang, he tells himself:

I see him, and, for one fleeting moment, I am sorry for him, but then I think—For thirty-six years, you and yours have trampled on us and tried to destroy our souls.... Love and compassion that have been smothered by the memories of thirty-six years cannot be resurrected by pity that last only for a fleeting moment. (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 158)

The narrator tries hard to suppress his anger toward them and even saves a Japanese Shinto priest who seeks a place to hide from Korean mobs. The narrator knows that his father does not want to see the young boy, "I," experience bloody vengeance. It is not that the boy leaves vengeance for God; rather, he comes to realize the impossibility of forgiving.

When Korea was liberated, the boy's father blamed himself and his generation for not being able to bring independence with their own hands and spirit—violent revenge is not something that should be left for the next generation. What the father wishes for his son is to remember all things that wounded the many souls who cannot be recovered by violence. Against the father's wishes, however, more Koreans lost their lives during the Korean War, during which none other than Koreans themselves were killing their fellow Koreans. No battle scene appears in *The Martyred*, but the nature of the tragedy is seen quite graphically in a letter delivered to Captain Lee from his childhood friend Park:

We got into a bayonet fight with a company of North Koreans in a valley...the trouble was that it was pitch-black night and that we all spoke Korean. Devil only knew which side we were killing. Everyone was shouting in the same language, "Who are you? Who are you?"...It depresses me to suspect that I am the very source of my horror. (R. Kim [1964] 2011, 24)

The question of forgiveness becomes even weightier when we deal with the Korean War. Can Koreans forgive themselves when they were actually “the very source” of their own horror? Perhaps a bigger issue that Kim had in mind is whether it is possible for one to forgive him or herself and move on toward the future. As the father wishes in *Lost Names*, the next generation “will have enough will and strength to make sure the country will not make the same mistakes and repeat its shameful history” (R. Kim [1970] 1998, 186). Though this may sound didactic, it also conveys Kim’s own wish for future generations, generations who will never say that they were deprived and who will not “lose” their names again (R. Kim 1985, 53).<sup>12</sup>

### Conclusion

While Kim’s personal experience of displacement may have worked its way into his literary description of displacement, his self-assumed exile identity embraced issues that went beyond the personal or the literary. This article has demonstrated how Kim constantly moved away from familiar territories—linguistic, cultural, and national—in order to underline a sense of loss and suffering that is shared by many. The exile identity, then, was a way for him to cross multiple borders—both symbolic and geographical—and break boundaries, creating a creative and ideology-free space in which he was able to speak about the meaning of togetherness. The first border crossing is shown in the narrator’s tracing of his memory of the very first experience of exile. Through bringing the recollections of the mother and the adult “I” into the memory of exile of the infant “I”, the displacement of Korean people from their land is reconstructed without the overflow of emotion. The monochrome image of people crossing the border resonates with the infant’s observation of the scene in terms of a certain distance from the intensity of danger and anxiety.

I have also highlighted the will to negate the nihilism of suffering and death embedded in Kim’s novels. In *The Martyred*, Captain Lee faces a difficult truth about a fabricated story of twelve priests in Pyongyang. By understanding the priest Shin’s intention to give hope to people even on the verge of abandoning his faith in God, Kim’s book emphasizes free will over succumbing to fate. Similarly, the young protagonist in *Lost Names* challenges the self-defeating notion of *han*. His response to the sorrow-laden scene of loss functions as a self-criticism of the pessimistic acceptance of the ill fate, and yet the child’s description of the sad ritual of grieving before the graves accentuates the reality of the situation. This documentary-like narration of

sadness changes to a subjective portrayal of suffering in the last part of the novel analyzed above, in which the narrator experiences physical pain and injustice. The bodily and psychological pain that the narrator experiences encourages him to maintain the will to remember this suffering.

Finally, I have shown Kim's handling of the concept of forgiveness in relation to remembrance. *Lost Names* directs us to the issue in a compelling way through the child's comprehension of the meaning of remembrance and forgiveness. The religious reference in the novel in fact rather turns against the religious teaching: true forgiveness can happen only when one realizes the impossibility of forgiving. Derrida's reflection on the concept of forgiveness helps us deconstruct the conditional forgiveness that takes no consideration of victims themselves.

Richard E. K. Kim's presentation of his novels as fictional autobiography was a creative strategy to articulate his interest in retrieving stories of people in Korea, whose experience of colonialism and the Korean War he vividly described. Kim's narrator, "I," in *Lost Names*, for example, establishes a unique relationship between the writer and his reader through which geographical, psychological, and cultural gaps are bridged. "I" speaks directly to his readers. However, the first-person voice keeps referring to "we" in the novel, and the reference to the "we-ness" becomes more frequent as "I" moves from the border between Korea and Manchuria to the liberated Korea, and from being an infant to being a high school boy. The same progression is detected in *The Martyred* and *The Innocent*, where the protagonist, Captain Lee, discovers the meaning of his community toward the end of each novel. All the characters in Kim's novels tell other peoples' stories with integrity and without being trapped in the hopeless state of mind that is often conceptualized in *han*.

Some writers' representations of certain ethnic groups' historical experiences in their homeland at times run the risk of facing criticism for fetishizing history (Shih 2004, 23). The representation of particularity is recognized by their readers as standing away from ideas of universality, and it is often celebrated for its difference without serious engagement with its implications in a global context. In this vein, Korean people's experience of colonialism and the Korean War may be analyzed as "their national history" that is accepted merely as a difference that "the West" is willing to recognize but fails to place in a global context. However, Kim, by taking a position of ontological exile, was able to shed light on histories of people, bringing in

the human spirit that can stand against the tyranny of metanarratives of nation and ethnicity—and this is reason enough that his novels should not be forgotten but remembered.

*Jooyeon Rhee is a lecturer in the department of Asian Studies at The Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The author would like to thank the two anonymous Cross-Currents reviewers whose constructive comments helped to improve this essay. She is also grateful to Professor Kim Chul at Yonsei University for his insightful comments on representations of the Korean War in Richard Kim's works.*

---

## Notes

- 1 Besides the danger of “self-othering” his/her own ethnic community away from the cosmopolitan center, the “diasporic artist or writer is burdened with the imposition of a great number of ready-made identities circulating through cultural and institutional discourses” (Mersal 2008, 1581).
- 2 Sijong Kim is a good example. He is known for his “brusque” composition of poetry that is intended to destroy the lyricism inherent in Japanese poetry. As Sökpöm Kim, a Korean novelist in Japan, states, the Japanese language is Sijong Kim’s “weapon” to critique Japanese imperialism (S. Kim and S. Kim 2015, 133–140).
- 3 Kim Wook Dong’s *Kim Ŭn’guk: Kŭ ũi sam kwa munhak* (2007a) is the first comprehensive biography and textual analysis of Richard Kim’s three novels.
- 4 Edward Said observed that, living in solitude and estrangement, the marginality of the exile’s experiences will somehow force the exile to create his own creative means to construct critical perspectives on humanity ([1984] 2000).
- 5 Kim stated that he “had a kind of exile problem while living in the States and writing about Korean characters and settings” (quoted in McDowell 1982).
- 6 Here, Kim was specifically discussing the scene in which the young protagonist is saved from a Japanese schoolteacher by a member of the Korean secret police (interview, cited in Kim W. 2007b, 44).
- 7 Kim’s father, who dedicated his life to education and the independence movement during the colonial period, taught at a mission school in Manchuria where Kim interacted with children from diverse national backgrounds (Kim W. 2007a, 27–29).
- 8 The Los Angeles riots were a series of civil disturbances that occurred in April 1992. The trouble started immediately after four white police officers, who had been accused of excessive use of violence on African American Rodney King, were acquitted by a jury trial. Many people rioted in the metropolitan area, in particular in Koreatown, where a significant number of Korean Americans suffered from looting, arson, and killings during the riots. For a detailed account of the racial dimension of the L.A. riots, see Abelmann and Lie (1997).
- 9 Writers whose works deal with Japanese colonialism and the Korean War include: Kim Ronyoung (1996), Chang-rae Lee (2000, 2010), Nora Okja Keller (1998), and Susan Choi (2004).
- 10 *The Innocent* was reviewed negatively by literary critics in the United States for its incoherent depiction of the protagonist’s faith in military action and his will to maintain

- “innocence,” the ambiguous geographical and political backgrounds, and some inaccurate or ambiguous expressions in English (Kim W. 2007a, 271–294).
- 11 In the book, Derrida did not specify the object of the negotiation between Korea and Japan—just that it was on the issue of Japan’s war crimes committed on Koreans.
- 12 Kim was highly discontent with the Korean and Japanese translations of the book’s title: *Ppaeatkin irūm* (Names that were deprived) and *Nao ubawarete* (Even deprived of names), respectively. Kim argued that these titles did not convey his true intention of emphasizing one’s acceptance of and taking responsibility for losing names as a historical agent.

## References

- Abelmann, Nancy, and John Lie. 1997. *Blue Dreams: Korean Americans and the Los Angeles Riots*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Barthes, Roland. (1967) 1978. “The Death of the Author.” In *Roland Barthes: Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath, 142–148. New York: Hill and Wang.
- . (1970) 1998. “To Write: An Intransitive Verb?” In *The Rustle of Language*, translated by Richard Howard, 11–21. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Camus, Albert. 1991. “Nihilism and History.” In *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt*, translated by Anthony Bower, 101–104. New York: Vintage.
- Choi, Susan. 2004. *The Foreign Student*. New York: Harper Perennial.
- Chu, Seo-Young. 2008. “Science Fiction and Postmemory Han in Contemporary Korean American Literature.” *MELUS* 33 (4): 97–121.
- “Chung-so hanin silsang p’ot’o eseiro” [The reality of Koreans in China and the Soviet Union reflected in photographs]. 1989. *Chungang Daily*, May 5. Available at <http://news.joins.com/article/2330615>, accessed November 11, 2015.
- Derrida, Jacques. (1997) 2001. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, edited by John D. Caputo, 27–60. Translated by Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes. New York: Routledge.
- Fenkl, Heinz Insu. (1964) 2011. “Introduction.” In *The Martyred*, by Richard Kim, xvii–xxxi. New York: Penguin.
- Hwang Sögyöng. 2001. *Sonnim* [The guest]. Seoul: Ch’angjak kwa pip’yong.
- Keller, Nora Okja. 1998. *Comfort Woman*. New York: Penguin.
- Kim, Richard. (1964) 2011. *The Martyred*. New York: Penguin.
- . 1968. *The Innocent*. Seoul: Sisayongo-sa.
- . (1970) 1998. *Lost Names*. 40th anniversary edition. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 1985. *Irhöbörin sigan ūl ch’ajasö* [Searching for lost times]. Seoul: Somundang.
- . 1998. “Preface.” In *Lost Names*, by Richard Kim, 40th anniversary edition, ix–xxiii. Speech originally given at the Fiftieth International PEN Conference in Lugano, Switzerland, May 12, 1987. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Kim Ronyoung (a.k.a. Gloria Hahn). 1996. *Clay Walls*. New York: Permanent Press.
- Kim Sökpöm and Sijong Kim. 2015. *Naze kikitsujuketekitaka naze chimmokushitekitaka* [Why have we been writing and why have we been silent?]. Tokyo: Heibonsha.
- Kim Wook Dong. 2007a. *Kim Ũn’guk: Kū ūi sam kwa munhak* [Kim Ũn’guk: His life and literature]. Seoul: Seoul National University Press.

- . 2007b. “Kim Un’guk sosŏl e nat’anan chajŏnjŏk yoso” [Autobiographical elements in Kim Un’guk’s novels]. *Saehan yŏngŏ yŏngmunhak* 49 (2): 31–50.
- Lee, Chang-rae. 2000. *A Gesture Life*. New York: Riverhead.
- . 2010. *The Surrendered*. New York: Riverhead.
- Lie, John. 1995. “From International Migration to Transnational Diaspora.” *Contemporary Sociology* 24 (4): 303–306.
- McDowell, Edwin. 1982. “About Books and Authors.” *The New York Times*, May 9. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1983/01/02/books/about-books-and-authors-what-sold-in-1982.html?pagewanted=all>, accessed on June 25, 2015.
- Mersal, Iman. 2008. “Eliminating Diasporic Identities.” *PMLA* 123 (5): 1581–1589.
- Rankin, Walter P. 1999. “Autobiographical Fiction vs. Fictional Autobiography: Christa Wolf’s *Kindheitsmuster* and J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 36 (4): 306–319.
- Said, Edward. (1984) 2000. “Reflections on Exile.” In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, by Edward Said, 137–149. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- . (1975) 2009. “The World, the Text, and the Critic.” In *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, edited by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas, and Mbongiseni Buthelezi, 259–284. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Shih, Shu-Mei. 2004. “Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition.” *PMLA* 119 (1): 16–30.