

“‘If the subject is a proposition’: Multilingualism and Nostalgia in Myung Mi Kim’s *Commons*”

Sarah Dowling

University of Pennsylvania

Lyric poetry is colloquially understood as a repository, a trove of personal thought and feeling. Recent criticism suggests that this vernacular theory ought to be taken more literally; for example, Julia Bloch explains that we can “think of the interior of a poetic speaker as a kind of archive, and the archive of a poet as a kind of interior to the poem.” Bloch argues that certain contemporary poems identified as lyric both invite and resist this gendered “archive of privacy, even secrecy,” an archive that is ultimately “the audience’s projection” (33), an “insistence” on the part of readers “that an original interior haunts the poem” (39). Typically, then, the reader understands lyric poems as haunted by an archive of private feeling, the interiority of the author, and projects the imagined biographical secrets of a beloved poet upon her text. In this paper, I ask what happens when a poem self-consciously takes on this haunting, makes this projection. What happens when a poem’s task is to stage its author’s own archive, and the affective charge provoked by the documents within it?

I examine a series of poems by the Korean-American poet Myung Mi Kim; I will argue that rather than projecting biographical secrets, her poems use sound to concentrate emotional energy upon the past, and upon her own past in particular. For Kim, what makes these poems “lyric” is their “notat[ion]” of the “provisional location” of the present in relation to the archive of lived and distant history, what she calls the “storehouse of the human.” Their rhythm, she explains, undertakes “the task of

deciphering and embodying a ‘particularizable’ prosody of one’s living” (111). These poems interrogate “the terms under which” such notation takes place; their work is to “counter the potential totalizing power of language that serves the prevailing systems and demands of coherence” (110).

Kim’s poems approach their author’s past as a kind of archive, not the continuous history of a unified self, but a collection of ephemera — memories, photographs, facts, and letters. Although she focuses very closely upon personal experience and emotion, and especially on loss and yearning, Kim carefully avoids depicting an expressive subject: these are lyric poems without a lyric “I.” Instead, through “stress,” “beat,” “alterations in pitch and accentuals,” “tempo ruptured, emended,” Kim’s poetry notates “a valence of first and further tongues” (111). This phrasing is somewhat deceptive: Kim’s linguistic combinations point crosswise and backward; they avoid and even oppose the future orientation typical of vanguard projects. I will examine Kim’s multilingualism, and the figures of children that are so ubiquitous in her works, and will show that these come together to locate a partial subject in the past, a beloved and vulnerable former self. Rather than charting a linear progression from the “first” to the “further,” from the younger self to the old, the pervasive multilingualism of Kim’s texts, what I call her “emigrant prosody,” instead renders the projective and layered temporality of nostalgia. Multilingualism is foundational to Kim’s prosody, but her multilingualism often seems implicit in comparison to the direct importation of languages we see in the work of her contemporaries such as Cecilia Vicuña, M. NourbeSe Philip, and James Thomas Stevens,

or her modernist precursors like Pound and Eliot. Kim's poems often concern translation and language learning: she frequently moves between alternate romanizations of Korean words and phrases, or offers phrases translated into English but leaves a blank where readers might expect the original text to appear. Although Korean appears rather infrequently, as Joseph Jonghyun Jeon argues, the poems' sound patterns are based in the sounds considered to be most difficult for native speakers of Korean to produce in English. Saturated with awkward and uncomfortable sounds, Kim's prosody renders ethnically specific forms and experiences of shaming, and uses these to draw connections between various historical moments, situating the 1950s and '60s, the period of her childhood, as the emotional center of her investigation.

Kim's prosody does not chart the journey preceding an arrival; it does not mimic a state prior to English or an early stage of English acquisition, nor does it posit English as any sort of destination or goal. Although the poems include few words and phrases in Korean, I call this prosody "emigrant" because in addition to the depiction of the difficulty involved in learning English and the saturation of the poems with sounds difficult for native speakers of Korean, Kim is also deeply interested in Korean itself, and in the status of her own diminished ability to speak and write it — to illustrate, in one of her books a letter in Korean appears, handwritten in an awkward, childish script. Rather than emphasizing her arrival in the U.S., the sedimentation of languages that characterizes Kim's prosody is representative of and primarily concerned with departure and transit,

and therefore with childhood, the period during which her own departure from Korea took place.

In a heartbreaking line from a poem in another book, *Dura*, Kim notes her own experience at the age of nine: “One of the first words understood in English: stupid.” Similarly, Kim often refers to difficulties and mistakes in pronunciation; in another poem in *Dura* she includes the following lines: “Donor: dolor // Placement between *l* and *r*” (27), citing a stereotypical pronunciation difficulty. This mispronunciation crosses gift with pain, calling attention to the “Placement between”: the tongue’s placement between these sounds, the speaking figure’s placement between intended and unintended definitions. Examples of linguistic mistakes are frequent in her work; Jeon argues that Kim focuses especially on the speaking mouth, “insistently invoking the tendencies of the native Korean speaker speaking English ... using these tendencies as a way of establishing phonetic cohesion throughout the stanza” (144). Using “precisely these mistakes as the raw materials with which to build its stylistic bridges,” for Jeon, the saturation of Kim’s poems with these difficult sounds is the basis of her sonic mastery (144).

I find Jeon’s analysis extremely persuasive, but I read Kim’s frequent descriptions of mistakes and mispronunciations, and the “phonetic cohesion” achieved through the accretion of difficult sounds as a prosody based in the experience of emigration, and in its attending experiences of shame. This prosody — while certainly masterful — is not about mastery. Indeed, the critical tradition of reading Kim’s work as lyric makes it difficult not

to see these humiliated learners as figures for Kim's younger self; indeed, the poems explicitly invite this reading; however, mastery (even a progression to future mastery) is unlikely as a value of her poetics oeuvre. On the contrary, Kim's work focuses on lack, loss, and humiliation, lingering in these uncomfortable spaces.

In *Commons*, for example, Kim attends to small bits of sound, "random, skittish stutterings," that she imagines as "potential sounds in Korean or, for that matter, in any number of languages (Middle English, Latin, French) that constitute English." These incipient or "potential sounds" frequently transition into actual words, either in Korean or in English. This linguistic multiplicity, which Kim values for its connotations of possibility, receives harsh treatment when other voices intrude and pass judgment upon its incomprehensibility. In the following section of the poem "Lamenta," for example, it is clear that even explicit connections between Korean and English words cannot redeem the "random, skittish stutterings" or the words in Korean from being considered only as "noise":

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ap
ac

Pock

ji-wuat-dah erased

jil-eu-dah shouted

Regarded among penury

Numb pie mum pie

jip-sae-gi ji-pah-raeng-e : show here

Look at that noise!

Numb pie mum pie (52)

The progression of this poem from the sounds “ap” and “ac” into words in Korean and English positions these sounds as fragments of potential meaning. Rather than being valued for their potential, however, these “stutterings” are instead “Regarded among penury,” viewed in the context of lack. They are “Numb” sounds with no referent. It is clear that although the Korean phrases share something with the English ones (“Regarded” and “Look” are semantically linked to “*jip-sae-gi ji-pah-raeng-e*,” translated as “show here”), but the possibility of pursuing that connection is foreclosed. When the non-English words and sounds are dismissed as “that noise” and are mimicked in the repeated phrase “Numb pie mum pie,” it is clear that they are considered not in terms of their actual or potential meaning, but only in terms of their “penury,” their failure to mean in English.

These attributions of meaninglessness serve as a demonstration of the ways in which language becomes the grounds upon which subjectivity is denied. The failure to conform linguistically leaves one “among penury,” as mere “noise.” Kim’s sentence fragments are striking for their conspicuous lack of either a subject or an object: the lines “*ji-wuat-dah* erased,” “*jil-eu-dah* shouted,” and “Regarded among penury” are

suggestive of actions, but not of who performs them, or upon whom. These sourceless and directionless actions seem to come from a human body, since they fall under the heading of “Pock,” but after all, a pock is not so much a part of a body, as the absence of one of its parts, a place where a piece of that body has been scratched away, or consumed by infection. More violently, “pock” is also “an abrupt and percussive sound,” such as “a bullet striking a wall,” and thus the actions listed below it perhaps refer to the frenzied confusion that follows such a noise. Ultimately, these actions and sounds remain meaningless; while it is possible to project various scenarios from their combination, or to imagine the bodies that perform them or the bodies upon whom they are performed, the most clear phrase in the poem is “Look at that noise!,” a negative judgment — an invitation to negative judgment — against them.

Depicting emigration this way, at the level of sound and rhythm, avoids the telos of *bildung*, or of any developmental narrative. Jeannie Chiu explains that “Kim moves away from highlighting the split personality of the excluded individual [and] instead focus[es] upon the shame of societies that oppress specific cultures and languages.” When children in Kim’s poems are shamed for being “stupid,” it is not only the inability to conform to the linguistic and cultural norms of their new environment that prompts peers or teachers to judge these children severely. Peers and teachers understand their former environment and language as meaningless, and imposed that meaninglessness is upon the children as well. Kim frequently discusses this meaninglessness in economic terms, as “penury” or “poverty,” a lack that leads to social censure and judgment. In this way, Kim’s evocations

of childhood point to the problem of lived time, of lives denied the legibility of an itinerary, and of lives whose imperiled condition prompts a constant, sentimental turning backward, a nostalgic cleaving to the figure of the child.

In “Pollen Fossil Record” Kim describes her project in *Dura* as a consideration of temporality: she explores the “Feminization of the problem of lived time” (108). We might think of her question like this: if “becoming a historical subject” (108) is a process that unfolds over time, how does this process take place for “remote, castigated” subjects such as the impoverished or the feminized (108)? In another of Kim’s poems, “Thirty and Five Books,” Kim uses a radically diminished, and a radically diminishing poetic form to explore “feminiz[ed]” subjects and their temporalities: each of the “Books” referenced in the title is represented by an extremely brief and spare poetic line, and each line represents a year in Kim’s life, or in the life of someone very much like her. The title’s imperfect description of the poem is instructive: although the title is “Thirty and Five Books,” the poem has only twenty-nine lines, beginning at six. Already, a loss is suggested; compounding the loss of the first six “books” is the fact that of each “book,” only one line appears in the poem.

Each line of the poem corresponds to a year in the life of a subject; in this way, the form of the poem suggests a subject who is, to use the poem’s terminology, merely “a proposition.” Rather than the expanse, the narrative progression, or the ontological certainty of autobiography, this form specifically accommodates the “feminiz[ed]” or reduced subject. In spite of the normative life events that appear on Kim’s list — being

rewarded for straight A's, falling in love, the birth of her son — the status of the figure to whom the list of events refers is not certain, her subjectivity is put forth as a possibility, but it is not guaranteed. Much like “ap” and “ac,” the potential sounds in English or Korean, which are denied the possibility of meaning, the subject in “Thirty and Five Books” exists as an unrealized and unacknowledged possibility.

Although in other contexts children might represent the future, in Kim's poems they are more suggestive of powerlessness and limitation, vulnerability and partiality. While I have suggested that the most notably “lyric” feature of Kim's poetry is their sound, it is nevertheless the case that Kim's depictions of children who are shamed for being “stupid” invite readers to project what we imagine as her biography upon the poem. In the manner that I explained at the outset of this paper, they invite us to imagine her biography as the secret that unites its spare fragments. In making this invitation, Kim's poems ask us to imagine her own arrival in the U.S. in 1966, to imagine the new reality inaugurated by the rapid and dramatic increase of Asian immigration to the U.S. in the late 1960s. But her Korean-inflected prosody suggests the impossibility of her arrival: while new laws permitted Kim and others to emigrate to the U.S. and to naturalize as citizens, old prejudices nevertheless prevented their social inclusion. Linguistic combinations demonstrate the social circumscription of meaning and the attribution of meaninglessness to subjects (and to their languages). Humiliated children and the subject-
evoking linguistic fragments that are mocked for their penurious failure to mean may well correspond to subjects of legal rights, but what is the meaning of those rights when

the subject to whom they are attached is socially understood as meaningless, or can scarcely be perceived as a subject at all?

Kim's work pulls in two directions: on the one hand is history, an official timeline, and on the other is "lived" time, a feminized time that is real and unavoidable, but that is unstructured, merely endured. Her poems reference an official history, they bear reference to historical events, but they also suggest that there is no development across it; indeed, given the content of Kim's work, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that time is not "lived" but lived *through*: the passage of time is about duration, not development. In her radically depersonalized lyrics, it is only the prosodic notation of time's passing that suggests the ongoing, but almost invisible presence of a subject, a lyric "I." Kim's work takes the acknowledgement of that possible subject as an ethical necessity — we must imagine the biographical secrets behind the poem. However, it is not her goal to retroactively confer subjectivity upon her younger self, or any of the other shamed, humiliated figures who appear in her poems. It is not her goal to make these figures feel any less "stupid." To retroactively assuage that figure's pain would be to acknowledge a progression beyond it, to suggest that difficulties like the difference between the words "donor" and "dolor" had been overcome. Rather than conquering dolor sufficiently to become a donor, able to offer solace, Kim's poems endure the space between these sounds, between their meanings of gift and pain. They test our ability to dwell in meaninglessness, not only to endure it, but to desire it, too.

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