

The Voided Dialogue

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I believe I can contribute to this dialogue as a scholar who studies the ways in which race, ethnicity, and migration affect the development, well-being, and mental health of people from immigrant and racial minority backgrounds. It is using this lens and set of experiences that I would like to reflect on Eun-Kyung Suh's work.

On the surface, Suh situates her art in two essential features of Korean culture and everyday life- the bojagi (traditional Korean cloths used to wrap objects to carry) and the five elements of Korean and Chinese philosophy (denoted in color by Blue, Red, Yellow, White, Black). It is easy to appreciate the aesthetic beauty of these features but there is clearly more to each piece than meets the eye. Each piece tells a story and these stories in turn reflect larger realities.

I want to begin by addressing this larger reality and then move inward by reflecting on Suh's work.

Immigration is at the forefront of political news lately. Immigration reform, particularly what to do with the presence and continued influx of illegal immigrants in this country, is one of President Obama's top agenda items. Federal raids at factories and farms have led to the arrest of thousands of illegal immigrants who are working jobs that sustain our economy but that American citizens do not want to work. More recently, the passage in Arizona of Senate Bill 1070 targets illegal aliens by requiring documentation of residence but it has been severely criticized as also encouraging racial profiling and infringing on the rights of U.S. citizens. There also is a movement to repeal the 14th Amendment, which, among many things, grants citizenship to individuals who are born in this country. At issue are the children born to illegal immigrants but it also relates to children born to foreign nationals who are tourists or attending school in the country. Proponents of repealing the 14th Amendment argue that these babies, dubbed "anchor babies," are used by their parents to remain in this country. Unfortunately, fear, suspicion, and hostility toward foreigners whether legally or illegally residing in this country and who do not act and look like "Americans" (that is, White) is nothing new in American history.

It is in this broader context of how ethnicity, race, and migration play out in American life that Suh's exhibit, *The Voided*, speaks to me. I am not suggesting that her work is a commentary on the politics of immigration. Rather, each piece reflects the feelings of displacement and loss and the yearning for home and belonging that every immigrant experiences- the voluntary immigrant who arrives in this country for a better education and career; the involuntary immigrant who flees a homeland due to political persecution; the illegal resident who works as a day laborer for below-minimum wages.

We live in an era of globalization that presents a myriad of opportunities for people to connect with other people all over the world. Yet globalization also brings about fragmentation of the self and the family. Migration and settlement in a new country- whether voluntary or involuntary- means that something, someone was left behind. The challenge then is how to reconcile what is gained with what is lost, as well as to create anew.

The British sociologist Robin Cohen described nine common features of a Diaspora. I will read through them quickly but will return to the ones most relevant to my reading of Suh's work. A Diaspora is characterized by (a) forced dispersal and displacement from one's homeland or (b) movement away from one's homeland in search of work; (c) a collective memory and myth about the homeland; (d) idealization of the ancestral home and a collective commitment to restore it (or recreate it); (e) a longing and desire to return home on day even if it's not physically possible; (f) a strong ethnic consciousness and identity; (g)

a troubled relationship with the host society/country; (h) a sense of empathy and solidarity with co-ethnics; and (i) the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in the host country with a tolerance for pluralism.

To me, the title of Suh's work- *The Voided*- reflects the existential dilemma of a Diaspora. How do we fill what is missing in our lives due to dislocation? Can we fill or replace that which is no longer with us but is always with us? And at a deeper level, how do we make meaning out of it all?

Using this Diaspora framework, Suh's own biographical history becomes important to reading her work. Suh was born, raised and educated in South Korea until she came to the United States as an international student to pursue her graduate education in fine arts. She now resides in Minnesota where she is a professor of art and design. As she notes in her exhibit, she also has a daughter and her father recently passed away- both of whom play a prominent role in her latest project. In other words, Suh is separated from her own family who remain in South Korea and she is now a legal resident of the United States with an American-raised (if not US-born) daughter. These simple facts about her culture and migration history permeate her work in intentional and perhaps, as we shall explore, in unintentional ways.

Give her biography, I found the use of two essential features of traditional Korean culture and life- the bojagi and the five elemental colors - all the more interesting. Parallel to the Diaspora features described earlier, Suh makes it clear that South Korea is her homeland. This is not surprising given that she moved to the United States as an adult for educational and professional opportunities. However, I suspect Suh is a permanent resident of this country, if not a naturalized citizen. In other words, although Minnesota and the United States are her current home, it is not her homeland. This position is quite distinct from children of immigrants who are born in this country or immigrate at a young age with their families. For this latter group, South Korea may be the motherland but American is their homeland.

Suh likes wise demonstrates a strong ethnic consciousness and commitment to maintaining and restoring two deeply traditional, historical elements of Korean culture through the use of bojagi and the five elemental colors. These two features invoke collective memories and myths about the homeland-from the role of women in Korean society as resourceful and beautiful to the Confucian traditions that help maintain hierarchy and stability. Interestingly, the bojagi is both romanticized and gets recreated and repurposed in a manner that helps to secure its relevance in a changing, modernizing society. Likewise, the elemental colors set against a white pure background seem to bring harmony to fragmented memories and images that otherwise seem out of place.

Although Suh now lives and works in Minnesota, I found it fascinating that most of the memories placed in the bojagi vessels-from family photographs to images of her father-are all located in South Korea. The only images that are located in this country are those of her American-raised daughter and her friend's family. As I think of the ways in which a Diaspora manifests itself, this choice of images makes sense.

I may be stretching things here but as I reflected on the current debates around immigration and Diaspora experiences, it struck me that perhaps, Suh's daughter in some way serves as a symbolic "anchor baby" in this exhibition. We see bits of cloth from her daughter's clothing integrated into the BLACK layers of cloth, serving as a link to her deceased father back South Korea, represented by the WHITE layers of cloth. We also see a photograph of her daughter sitting beside her friend's daughter in the one of bojagi boxes that connects the BLUE and RED boxes. We see distinct, fragmented memories of what is Korean and what is American coming together through the life of the child of an immigrant. As Robin Cohen articulated, for people of a Diaspora, there is the possibility of a distinctive, creative, enriching life in a host country with a tolerance for pluralism.

People who are part of a Diaspora must make meaning out of the fractures experienced in life. These fractures become manifest in fragments of memories. There is a longing then to return to the homeland or what one now imagines as the homeland. The piece titled **YELLOW** depicts the different places where Suh has lived throughout her life, including the length of time spent in each location. Each bojagi panel contains stitched landscapes of her past homes. Personally I found this piece to be the most fascinating because, more than the other pieces, it reminded me of my own family.

Although my parents voluntarily immigrated to this country nearly 50 years ago, in a sense, they had no choice given the desperate conditions of South Korea following the war. And so, it is not surprising that throughout my childhood, they yearned for Korea. For my father, he yearned for his family and friends lost and left behind in what is now North Korea. I recall watching him flip through his high school alumni directory, pointing at people's faces and wondering aloud where they now are (or if they even alive). As I got older and my father returned to painting, he painted hundreds of landscapes of the mountains that are situated between the South and North. These imagined landscapes comforted him. But the reality is that the Korea that my parents longed for, that they imagined in their daydreams, that they thought would be their retirement home was not the Korea of modern day. It was a Korea long gone. A Korea that no longer exists except in the memories of my parents. They finally came to this realization after a visit to Korea in the 1990s, as South Korea was prospering. My mother came back home and told me that she could never retire in Korea. It had changed too much. And she had changed too much. Although she never said it in these exact words, I sensed what she meant was that my mother was not making America her homeland.

The Voided is often filled with memories of our past but as we lay memory upon memory, as we stitch together the fabric of our lives, the fragments of the past mix together with the present to become one coherent story of who we were then and who we are today.