INTRODUCTION

In 2000 the East West Players (EWP) in Los Angeles produced the Korean American playwright Euijoon Kim's new play *My Tired Broke Ass Pontificating Slapstick Funk*, which represented a new direction for the EWP. As the premier Asian American theater company, EWP was known for its long association with Little Tokyo, a Japanese American community in Los Angeles, and its loyal subscribers consisted mostly of older Japanese Americans. With Kim's provocative play, the company aimed to reach out to new audiences, especially those of the younger generation in Koreatown across the city. The theater critic Julio Martinez described the play as representative of "a vibrant but embryonic culture struggling to establish its own identity out of the myriad influences that are constantly bombarding it."[1]

At the time, I was in Los Angeles to attend a panel discussion on the future of Asian American drama and to interview Asian American theater artists. I also had a personal investment in Kim's play. As a Korean American of the generation Kim writes about, I wanted to see what he had to say about the direction of the emerging culture cultivated in Koreatown. I grew up in Southern California and recognized his characters and their issues. Kim was also a panelist, and I wanted to hear what he had to say.

Led by Alice Tuan, the panel included more established writers such as Sandra Tsing Loh and Chay Yew. As the youngest member of the panel, Kim was expected to speak for the new generation of Asian Americans in the twenty-first century and to articulate the significance of his play. Instead, Kim took a nap onstage, or at least made it look as if he was. While the other writers on the panel spoke, he closed his eyes, crossed his arms, and tilted his head while sitting in his chair. The audience initially laughed at this, but we soon realized he was not going to speak at all. Recalling the event, Kim says that he was annoyed with the questions he received and did not care for the "flowery, poetic Asian American" topic.[2] Bored, angry, and annoyed, Kim remained onstage as a non-

participant. His performance was in stark contrast to the polite audience and his fellow panelists who remained throughout the discussion. In one sense, at least, the EWP had gotten its wish: the company wanted to rebel against its own tradition, and the rebel was literally onstage. As I sat in the audience, I watched Kim and thought about what the moment signified. Many compared Euijoon Kim to Frank Chin, the iconic Chinese American playwright who debuted in American theater in 1972 with the play *Chickencoop Chinaman*. The hypermasculine anger toward society and a sense of youthful angst were the obvious points of comparison, but Kim, unlike the loquacious Chin, had not figured out a way to verbally express his frustrations. Kim, a young Korean American from Koreatown, was out of place in Little Tokyo, and the majority of the conference attendees did not understand his world. In 2000, a Korean American playwright had much explanation to do before he could tell his story, and Kim was still struggling to find his voice as a playwright.

Euijoon Kim is one of what I call the Korean diasporic playwrights, some of whose plays are represented in this collection. At the dawn of the new millennium, only a handful of plays about the Korean diaspora in the Americas had been written, and playwriting was not a common choice of profession. But within ten years, theater had attracted a growing number of talented writers who used the stage to dramatize and crystallize the world they know. They are no longer silent and displaced as playwrights. Rather, they command attention, and the purpose of this collection is to capture the quality and dynamism of the writers and their plays. The collection features seven contemporary plays about the Korean diaspora, written by Korean diasporic playwrights in the Americas. Included are five full-length plays and two one-acts; the writers include one from Canada, one from Chile, and five from the United States. The dates of the plays span about ten years since the late 1990s, and all have received professional productions or workshops. The plays were selected carefully to demonstrate the vast diversity of themes and styles of playwriting, but they were also chosen to represent common motifs in plays about the Korean diaspora in the Americas.

KOREAN DIASPORA IN THE AMERICAS

The phrase "Korean diaspora in the Americas" is used broadly to include Korean immigrants and their descendants in the United States, Canada, and Latin America. It is not meant to replace ethnic or cultural groupings such

as "Korean American"; rather it functions as an inclusive term to provide a hemispheric perspective of Korean immigration and diasporic histories in the Americas. I use "Korea" to signify the entire peninsula before the Korean War (1950–53), but I also use it interchangeably with "South Korea" to refer to its history after the war. After World War II, the country was divided into North and South, and immigration to the Americas came mostly from South Korea. But immigration began decades earlier. From the first decade of the twentieth century, Korean laborers arrived in Hawaii to work on sugar plantations. And starting in the 1960s, immigration laws in both the Americas and Korea were significantly eased.[3] After 1965, the number of immigrants grew exponentially, and it is estimated that by 1980, over a half million had immigrated to the Americas from Korea. Many immigrants who left Korea for the Americas after 1965 were professionals, students, wives of American military personnel, adoptees, and relatives of those already residing in the host country. Some were also illegal immigrants who had to travel through a third country in order to arrive at their final destination. Whatever the backgrounds and reasons for immigration, the majority of immigrants settled in urban enclaves. According to the 2005 data reported by the Overseas Koreans Foundation, it is estimated that 6.6 million Koreans live in 160 different countries worldwide. The United States is home to the second largest Korean immigrant population with 2.08 million (China being the largest, with 2.43 million). Canada has almost 200,000, and about 107,000 live in Central and South America.[4]

Korea was occupied by Japan from 1910 to 1945 during the latter's imperialist expansion into Asia. After Japan's defeat in World War II, Korea depended on the United States for its postwar recovery, with a constant U.S. military presence at home and a growing number of Koreans immigrating to the United States. Accordingly, studies on the Korean diaspora in the Americas have been dominated by U.S.-based scholars, and Korean American studies have grown steadily as an important area study. Among U.S. cities, Los Angeles has received much scrutiny because the city has the largest concentration of Koreans outside of Korea and because of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 that garnered international attention. Victims of the riots quickly became the public face of the Korean diaspora, as the news media disseminated images of frustrated business owners left on their own to protect their properties and families. Speaking broken English and looking painfully displaced, these Korean immigrants embodied the failure to achieve the American Dream.

Attempts to explain the causes and consequences of the riots have led to a

popular yet reductive narrative of survival and perseverance. Koreans in the United States and elsewhere have been described as a strong diasporic people who would sacrifice themselves for the betterment of their children's future. A father with a college education from a top university in Korea would own a swap-meet store downtown while his wife would toil away at a garment factory receiving minimum wage. Their children would be accepted to Ivy League schools to become lawyers, doctors, and engineers. Such iterations of the American Dream would inspire more Koreans to leave their homeland. Images of the broken merchant from the L.A. riots were quickly replaced with those of successful Korean immigrants throughout the Americas. From politics to popular culture, descendants of Korean immigrants have been visible front and center and often in unexpected professions. For instance, in the United States, the law professor John Yoo became known for having authored the most controversial part of the Patriot Act during the Bush administration. Jun Choi was elected in 2005 as mayor of Edison, New Jersey. In Canada, Yonah Kim-Martin became the first Korean Canadian to hold federal office. In popular culture, the Canadian-born actress Sandra Oh won a Golden Globe Award in 2006, and in 2008 Yul Kwon became the winner of the popular American television show *Survivor*. Korean American and Korean Canadian actors such as Yunjin Kim, John Cho, Grace Park, and Daniel Dae Kim have played major roles in television shows and films that have been seen worldwide. Yunjin Kim in particular has had transnational success by appearing in both American and Korean productions. Margaret Cho, with her biting humor, has been recognized as one of the funniest comedians in the United States. In literature, mainstream critics have taken notice of writers such as Chang-Rae Lee and Min Jin Lee. There is also a growing list of professional athletes with Korean roots: Angela Park (golf, Brazil), Jim Paek (ice hockey, Canada), and Hines Ward (football, United States), to name only a few. The seeming suddenness of such collective achievements has led many to wonder what has happened since the L.A. riots, when the popular image of Koreans was that of desperate, unassimilated immigrants who had lost everything.

For second-generation Koreans in the Americas (including those who were born in Korea and immigrated before adulthood, sometimes called the "1.5 generation"), opportunities for success are abundant compared to those of their parents' generation, and many have taken full advantage of it. But research in the social sciences has also shown that narratives of immigrant success do not reveal the full picture of the Korean diasporic history in the

Americas. For every success story, there is an unsuccessful and even tragic one. Indeed, the popular images tell only the most visible part of the story, but the Korean diasporic communities in the Americas are vastly complex and contradicting. With the increase in population and diversity, definitions of success and identity have varied, and there is no longer a clear pattern to singularly describe the Korean diaspora in the Americas.

Complicating the individual achievements of the second generation has been what is commonly known as *hallyu*, or the Korean Wave, which has made popular South Korean entertainment fashionable in Asia and beyond. For example, the singer Rain performed in Madison Square Garden to sold-out audiences, and South Korean television soap operas have inspired women in Southeast Asia to undergo cosmetic surgery to look "Korean." Second-generation Koreans in the Americas have witnessed the global renaissance of the Korean culture during the past decade. The distinction between "Korean" and "abroad" has all but been erased with the Internet, satellite television, and global film distribution. In theater, musicals such as *The Last Empress* and *Nanta* have toured internationally and received recognition for creating intercultural forms of theatrical expression. The sudden popularity of *hallyu* has been seen as a by-product of the equally sudden rise of the South Korean economy, which has grown from almost nothing to a trillion U.S. dollars in less than half a century. The South Korean economy, described as the "Miracle on the Han River," now ranks fifteenth in the world.[5] In the 1990s, South Korea was one of the "Asian tigers" recognized for extraordinary economic growth. When the vast majority of Korean immigrants left for the Americas in the 1970s and 1980s, there was little doubt that they were in search of better employment and educational opportunities in a foreign land. In succeeding years, however, the Korean economy became far more industrialized globally, with brands such as Samsung and Hyundai projecting home-grown opportunities for the twenty-first century. Korean Americans could listen to Korean popular music (K-Pop) on their Samsung smartphones, but the music would be among thousands of songs created by artists from all around the world and distributed by multinational corporations. Such flexible ethnic identities are no longer based solely on the impossible choice between the "homeland" or the "host country," but the option to define oneself transnationally and globally. Aided by South Korea's economic rise, *hallyu* has given the Korean diasporic communities a dialectical sense of unified ethnonational pride and wide-open freedom from national boundaries.[6]

Accordingly, the term "diaspora" has been used to signify a sense of decentralized cultural identity, one that requires a new set of questions and descriptors. The parameters that guide identity formations are not limited by nationhood or ethnic enclaves. Rather, the Korean diasporic communities have been influenced by new forms of mobility and groupings. Borrowing from the cultural critics Kandice Chuh and Karen Shimakawa, the concept of Korean diaspora "evokes multiple locations and movements and hesitates to fix itself as static epistemological object."[7] While neither static nor fixed, Korean diaspora as both concept and phenomenon can nevertheless be observed, documented, imagined, and represented. The plays in this collection remind us that the Korean diasporic condition—real or imagined—can be made known.

KOREAN DIASPORA PLAYS

For this collection I have selected plays that have been presented to audiences in fully produced forms or in reading workshops. The process of producing a play has its own internal politics and requires the collaboration of many people, including designers, actors, directors, dramaturgs, producers, and managers. Playwrights need a supportive community and what Rick Shiomi, a Japanese Canadian director, describes as a "theatrical infrastructure."[8] The infrastructure provides the foundation for theater artists to find their niche and voice, and, for young dramatists, finding the right community is often the key to making their work visible. In the United States, the main theatrical infrastructure that has supported Korean diasporic writers has been Asian American theater. As I describe in *A History of Asian American Theatre* (2006), a group of Asian American actors, playwrights, and directors started a movement in the 1960s and 1970s by forming theater companies, producing new plays, and advocating equal opportunity in American theater. In 1965, the EWP (Los Angeles), the first Asian American theater company, was founded, and others followed in New York City, San Francisco, and Seattle. There are now over forty active Asian American and Asian diasporic theater companies and groups around the country.

Over the past fifty years, Asian American theater, with its pan-ethnically formed infrastructure, has provided both space and labor for many Korean American playwrights to debut their work. The EWP have had the longest history of producing plays written by Korean or Korean American writers. Soon-Tek Oh, an actor and cofounder of the EWP, had three plays produced during

the early years of the company's history: *Martyrs Can't Go Home* (1967), *Camels Were Two-legged in Peking* (1967), and *Tondemonai-Never Happen* (1970).[9] Oh's plays are considered the first fully produced plays written by a writer of Korean descent in the Americas. After the departure of Soon-Tek Oh from the company, the EWP did not produce another Korean American play until 1995 with the world premier of *Cleveland Raining*. The play was followed in the 1999 season by a production of Chungmi Kim's *Hanako*, a play about Korean "comfort women" during the Japanese occupation in World War II. During the 1980s, the EWP had a subscription base that was predominantly Japanese American under the leadership of the artistic director Mako. It was only in the mid-1990s that the company explicitly made efforts to include plays about other ethnicities. Production histories are similar for other Asian American theater companies, such as Pan Asian Repertory Theatre (New York City) and the Asian American Theater Company (San Francisco). Korean American plays were rarely produced during the 1970s and 1980s, when plays presented under the category of "Asian American theater" were mostly about the Chinese and Japanese American experiences. One notable exception was the Asian American Playwrights Lab at the Public Theater founded in 1992 by Chiori Miyagawa. It was short-lived, but it introduced Sung Rno and Diana Son to the New York audience. Outside of the infrastructure of Asian American theater, Rob Shin received the Kennedy Center's National Student Playwriting Award in 1990 for his play *The Art of Waiting*. The play was produced in 1993 at the Round House Theatre in Maryland. Korean American playwrights, many of whom are included in this collection, began to emerge as a noticeable cohort starting in the second half of the 1990s.

The Korean American theater critic Terry Hong writes in her article "Times Up: The Moment Is Now" that Korean American playwrights are finally getting attention on their own without the connection to the pan-ethnic rubric of "Asian American." Hong quotes Randy Gener, the senior editor of the magazine *American Theatre*: "In a very real and significant way, I suspect, Korean American writers have been discouraged or eclipsed by the larger rubric of 'the Asian American movement,' a political consciousness that grew out of the late 1960s and early 1970s."[10] While the infrastructure of Asian American theater provided important production opportunities for Korean American playwrights, who would otherwise rarely have such chances, it may have also limited the kinds of topics that they could explore. Earlier generations of Asian American playwrights had to address racism, cultural nationalism, Oriental-

ism, and feminism in the most direct and basic ways because they had to educate the audience who knew very little about Asian Americans. Plays by these writers, including Frank Chin, Wakako Yamauchi, David Henry Hwang, Phillip Kan Gotanda, and Velina Hasu Houston, have defined the purpose and expectation of Asian American drama.

The playwrights in this collection have moved beyond the political consciousness of the 1960s and 1970s and the culture war of the 1980s and 1990s. In their plays, race and ethnicity are not central in obvious ways. Instead, they write about characters with multidimensional human problems that can afflict anyone regardless of their cultural identity. With Korean diasporic writers leading the way, Asian American theater as a whole has also changed. The most representative of such change has been Ma-Yi Theater, an Off-Broadway theater company in New York City. The company initially began as a Filipino American theater group but quickly began to incorporate other voices and promote new plays. Sung Rno and Lloyd Suh have been active as leaders of Ma-Yi's Playwrights Laboratory, which has been a critical entryway for new Korean diasporic writers. Indeed, Asian American theater continues to serve as the artistic home and theatrical infrastructure for many Korean diasporic playwrights, but the writers have also expanded their networks. Plays by Korean diasporic writers have been produced Off-Broadway and by companies in Seoul, the American Midwest, Toronto, and other venues that cannot be categorized racially or ethnically. And as the plays in this collection demonstrate, the writers have taken much freedom in exercising their artistic creativity and in exploring new ways of dramatizing the world they know.

As the de facto theater capital of the United States, New York City has attracted ambitious and talented theater artists around the world for decades, and the city is already becoming the gathering place for actors, designers, and writers of Korean descent. Some have already found respect and reputation, as in the case of the costume designer Willa Kim and the actor Randall Duk Kim, and others are arriving with nothing but the will to achieve their dreams. It remains to be seen whether a theatrical infrastructure for Korean diasporic theater will be centered in New York City, but the big city has been the professional starting point for the majority of the writers in this collection and for the actors who performed in their plays.

In Canada, a theatrical infrastructure did not exist for Asian Canadian theater to start as a movement even until the late 1990s. Some individual artists such as Rick Shiomi, who could not find opportunities in Canada, moved to

the United States, and those who stayed in Canada defined their work more broadly as multicultural. For instance, Cahoots Theatre Project (Toronto) has played a significant role in promoting diversity in Canadian theater, and many Asian Canadian artists have made it their home. While the number has been small, Korean Canadian playwrights such as Jean Yoon and M. J. Kang have played central roles in the development of contemporary Canadian theater. Both these women have collaborated in multiple projects and acted in each other's plays. Kang's *Noran Bang: Yellow Room* (1993) premiered at Cahoots Theatre Project while Yoon was the co-artistic director of the company. In fact, Kang's play is one of the earliest written in the Americas to address the second generation's experiences of displacement and identity crisis. Of Yoon's plays, *The Yoko Ono Project* has received attention as one of the most discussed projects in contemporary Canadian theater.[11] Canada has a unique history of government-led efforts to promote multiculturalism, and both Yoon and Kang have been at the forefront of creating and defining both Asian Canadian theater and Canadian multicultural theater.

Unlike the United States and Canada, Latin America has not been studied extensively for its Korean diasporic communities. One reason is the smaller immigration population spread over many different countries, which can make generalization difficult. Another reason has to do with language access and the preference of both Korean and North American scholars to use English in their research. In terms of theater, searching for Korean diasporic artists is a challenging task. Partly because of the cultural differences in how theater is defined and produced, playwriting is not the most accurate way to gauge theatrical activity. Script-based theater is, after all, a European tradition best continued in North America. Besides the Chile-born writer Kyoung H. Park, whose one-act play *Mina* is included in this collection, I am not aware of other Latin American playwrights of Korean descent. Of course, this does not mean that they don't exist. For English-speaking scholars like myself, it is simply easier to find those like Park, who writes in English and works in the United States. Although this collection proposes to represent the entire hemisphere of the Americas, it admittedly comes short in providing more examples of plays from Latin America. With this collection, I hope to open the possibility of emerging playwrights in North, Central, and South America to discover each other and to create a theatrical infrastructure that is truly transnational and diasporic.

In choosing the plays for this collection, I had to exclude a number of works that fully deserve publication. While it has not been easy to make the final

selection, I am encouraged to see the surge in both number and quality of plays written by writers of the Korean diaspora in the Americas. Some of those writers include Young Jean Lee, Euijoon Kim, Kimber Lee, M. J. Kang, Ins Choi, Philip Chung, Mia Chung, Suzanne Lee, Susan Kim, Ji Hyun Lee, Nic Cha Kim, Paul Juhn, Patty Jang, Katie Hae Leo, and Paul Lee. The majority of these writers are U.S.-based, and some have long been associated with specific theater companies, as in the case of Philip Chung and the Lodestone Theatre Company in Los Angeles. There are also a couple of Korean adoptee writers (Kimber Lee and Katie Hae Leo) who are beginning to receive professional productions of their plays. Young Jean Lee, in particular, has emerged as a major playwright in American theater with award-winning plays and her own company, Young Jean Lee's Theater Company. She has been recognized as one of the most experimental playwrights of American theater, and critics have described her plays as both subversive and funny. Most of her plays do not deal directly with Korean diasporic topics, but the one that does—*Song of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*—is a jarring take on her discomfort and anxiety in writing an "identity play." A collection of her work, *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (2009), is the first single-authored drama anthology by a Korean American writer.[12]

Korean diasporic plays, as a group, vary immensely in terms of specific characters, settings, plots, and dialogues. Some characters are assimilated second-generation college students who try to act like their white friends, while others are first-generation dry cleaners living out the stereotypical immigrant life. Some plays are set in Koreatowns while others take place in the middle of Texas or an abstract location. While most plays are written in the realistic style, a story can also take place entirely in a character's head. And every character speaks in different ways—ranging from Southern California Valley-speak to multilingual gibberish. However, there are several recurring themes and critical issues significant enough to merit a study of the plays as a group.

The word "diaspora," which literarily means scattering, evokes a sense of displacement and loss as well as adaption and survival. The recurring themes and issues in the plays derive from such dispersed sense of existence. At the same time, the existence is dynamic and constantly changing. Social scientists Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, in defining Asian diaspora, write, "Being diasporic requires continual reproduction of certain conditions and identifications."[13] The plays are essentially about such continual reproduction, and the

diasporic conditions and identifications are dramatized with themes of belonging, assimilation, family, memory, war, success, and ethnic identity.

The majority of the characters seek to know where they belong and how they should define themselves. The children of immigrants often did not have a say in their family leaving Korea for another continent, and they have difficulty resolving the enormous and sometimes embarrassing differences between their first-generation parents and other people in their surroundings. They may try to assimilate and blend in, but they do so as a consequence of losing a part of themselves. Their family tells them they are not Korean enough and that they have assimilated too much. The society at large tells them that they are too Asian, too Korean, or even foreigners, and their friends want them to be more political as Asian Americans, Asian Canadians, or other hyphenated identifiers. But they know in their hearts that race and ethnicity do not dictate their lives. They leave their family, or their family leaves them. Some visit Korea to find a sense of belonging, but they leave disillusioned and lonelier. They may look physically similar to people on the streets of Seoul but lack the language and cultural familiarity to truly fit in. Some realize that they do not belong anywhere, but they nevertheless continue to seek home, however elusive or imaginary it may be.

The sense of belonging is not limited to finding a home that may be represented with family, homeland, authenticity, or assimilation. Many plays deal with the pressure to succeed financially and professionally. Material success is perceived as the fastest and surest way to adapt and belong in a new society, and the plays portray first-generation characters stopping at nothing for their children's socially upward mobility. The first generation left Korea for a better life, and they do not want their children to live the desperate life many in Korea had to live after the Korean War. The history of the Japanese occupation of Korea, the Korean War, and the U.S. involvement in Korea never disappear as a backdrop to the choices the characters make. In the new country, some parents succeed and become wealthy, but their children see them as money-obsessed capitalists who do not know the value of a well-balanced life. But in most cases, the parents do not achieve the immigrant's dream and find comfort in churches, friends, and videos of Korean soap operas. The parents' impossibly high expectation for material success inevitably leads to a sense of failure for everyone. On the other hand, the second generation deals with material success in varying ways. A character may become an investment banker

and proudly declare that he is not like his father, but another may continue to work in the small store he inherits from his parents. Either way, all the characters deal with what it means to succeed and how success should be defined.

The playwrights also dramatize the ways in which gender dictates how success is measured and how the expectations for women differ from those for men. A female character's parents teach her the gender values taught by Confucius and tell her to obey them and her husband. She is told to dress modestly and to focus on finding a good Korean husband. But she finds Korean men unattractive because she thinks they can repress and stifle her individuality and freedom. One of the most common stories in the Korean diaspora drama is the mother-daughter relationship in which the daughter finds non-Korean men attractive. Parents, but mothers in particular, universally represent one's biological and cultural roots, and mothers commonly embody the "old country" even in the process of their rejecting it. Terms such as "mother land" emphasize the ways in which mothers are imagined in the minds of immigrants. When the mother is an immigrant herself, she also represents the choice to start afresh in a new country. In Korean diaspora plays, the trope of the mother, therefore, functions as a symbol of both the past and the future. And the mother-daughter relationships reveal one of the most complicated yet most common aspects of the diaspora. They have obvious love for each other and want the best for the other person, but they are entangled in a destructive web of contradictory goals and notions of success and happiness.

Stories of success and failure are complex and never mutually exclusive in the plays. Many characters hear contradictory messages about what is best for them. Some break down psychologically, while others convert their confusion into anger toward their parents or the society. They also turn to their work, to their church, to alcohol, or to a lover in an attempt to escape their reality. But what makes each play powerful and moving is the characters' sincere struggle to find answers and to make connections with others. The characters may never find resolution, but they continue to evolve and contribute to the collective exploration.

But ultimately, plays are literary works and products of the writers' imagination and creativity. How much the plays represent reality depends on the readers' or spectators' interpretation and reception. The majority of the playwrights have never been to Korea, and what they know of Korean history has small consequence to their everyday existence. None of the plays in this collection intends to be an ethnographic documentation of the Korean diaspora.

Rather, the plays are about what the writers have felt emotionally and imagined intuitively in seeing themselves as part of the Korean diaspora. The plays reflect the world that haunts the writers' minds. As a group, the playwrights have given life to stories that sketch the constantly evolving sense of being and becoming in the Korean diaspora. With the full acknowledgment of their talent and potential, I present the selected seven plays not to indicate a limit but to open the possibility of many more productions and publications to follow in the years to come.

THE SEVEN PLAYS IN THIS COLLECTION

The selection process for this collection was based on my wish to showcase a diverse range of topics and styles, but I have also given preference to plays that directly address Korean diasporic issues written by writers of the second generation. Many of the playwrights included here have written plays that have nothing to do with "Korean" as a cultural identifier, and some reject ethnic-specific labels that may hinder their freedom as writers. However, because the collection is about the Korean diaspora, the plays address it as a theme broadly and collectively. The two one-act plays, *History K* by Edward Bok Lee and *Mina* by Kyoung H. Park, bookend the full-length plays as prologue and epilogue.

History K begins the collection with a haunting monologue of an Asian prostitute named K who allegorically embodies the military occupation in Asia. While she could be of any Asian nationality, K's story can be read as a chronicle of the U.S. involvement in Korea's modern history. Written in the style reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's one-woman plays such as *Not I* and *Rockaby*, *History K* shows a woman painfully victimized by the West's military aggression in Asia. Unable to articulate her existence, K can only show fragmented glimpses of westernization forced onto her both physically and emotionally. The sociologist Grace M. Cho writes in her book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, "The Korean diaspora in the United States has been haunted by the traumatic effects of what we are not allowed to know—the terror and devastation inflicted by the Korean War, the failure to resolve it, and the multiple silences surrounding this violent history."[14] K's inarticulate words and silences create the poetry that serve as the prologue and a haunting background for the other plays in the collection.

Julia Cho's *99 Histories* is representative of many Korean diasporic plays that deal with remembrance, forgetting, and fantasy. In the play, memories

are faulty and fluid, and they also evolve over time. Cho tells what is in many ways a classic mother-daughter relationship story. When Eunice, the daughter, shows up pregnant long after running away from home, the mother, Sah-Jin, encourages her to look forward and to rebuild her life. But the daughter cannot move on without finding out about the past, especially about her mother's life in Korea and her father, who died abruptly in Los Angeles. By immigrating to the United States, Sah-Jin attempted to forget both her personal past and Korea's history, and Eunice ran away from her mother in order to escape her childhood, but they ultimately accept their realities and draw strength from the bond they have together. Like the old photographs Eunice finds, the play tells a multilayered story about the events that get documented and remembered and the secrets that get hidden and forgotten. "We remembered the wrong memories," says Eunice at the end of the play, but in embracing that fact, she can finally start to find peace.

Like the family in *99 Histories*, the Chun family in Lloyd Suh's *American Hwangap* has difficulty staying together. When the father returns from Korea after fifteen years, he is the physical reincarnation of the past memories the family has repressed and forgotten. The divorced wife and three grown children try to understand how they can—or would want to—function as a family. The oldest son, David, refuses to come home to celebrate his father's *hwangap* (the sixtieth birthday ritual celebrating the completion of the Eastern zodiac). The wife, Mary, is described as "a modern Asian-American woman" comfortably assimilated in Texas. While she is free from any obligation as a wife, she happily prepares the food for her ex-husband's birthday party. The daughter, Esther, disapproves of her parents, but the youngest one, Ralph, excitedly accepts the estranged father. Min Suk Chun, the father who describes himself as a cowboy, finds happiness and redemption with his broken family, but his children no longer have reasons to stay home. The play tells a Korean American version of the Wild West story with fiercely independent characters, lone wanderers, and survivors. Their humorous dialogues and cynical façades hide deep anger and disappointments, but they somehow continue to live on.

All the plays in the collection deal with myths in a broad sense. Whether it is the myth of the Korean family, the American Dream, or the model minority, the plays dismantle expectations placed on Korean immigrants and their children from both internal and external sources. The plays demonstrate the extreme to which a myth can be reified and destroyed. The worlds created in the plays do not resemble everyday realities, but they can function as abstract

parables from the Korean diaspora. Jean Yoon's *Hongbu and Nolbu: The Tale of the Magic Pumpkins* is an adaptation of one of the most commonly known Korean folklores. Children in Korea grow up hearing about the two brothers, Hongbu and Nolbu, whose story teaches them to be kind and honest. Yoon's adaptation was written initially for the audience of the Lorraine Kimsa Theatre, a theater for young people, in Toronto. The production brought together many Korean Canadian families, many of whom attended theater for the first time in Canada. Because of the play's use of Korean drumming, mask dance, and language, it was enthusiastically received by the older generation, and the specific references to popular culture (for example, video games) made the play contemporary and accessible for the younger generation. The play's popularity can also be explained by its self-referential humor in the style of both Korean mask drama and slapstick comedy. In an improvisational mode, actors change characters in front of the audience and tell them what happens next. From one perspective, the play tells a simple and innocent mythical story, but from another, it is a meta-theatrical extravaganza full of bizarre fantasies and dark humor.

Things turn even more bizarre with *Yi Sang Counts to Thirteen* by Sung Rno. The play takes place in "Seoul as reflected through a certain Mr. Yi Sang's strange and twisted brain." The Korean surrealist poet Yi Sang died in 1937 at the age of twenty-seven during the height of Japanese colonial rule in Korea. He is considered a poet genius who has received unprecedented posthumous recognition. Indeed, he is a mythic character in the Korean literary society. Sung Rno presents a surrealistic play inspired by translations of Yi Sang's poems that blur literary genres and defy structural rules. Like Yi Sang's poems, Rno's play is more about patterns, juxtapositions, and permutations, and less about conventional storytelling and character development. The three characters, identified as Blue, Red, and Green, commit to actions and words without the goal to communicate or to further the plot; rather, possibilities are limitless in what they could be or become. The play itself could also be many things, including a postmodern pastiche of the world known to Sung Rno. Or it could be, as the theater critic Adam Klasfeld notes, an inverted tale of the Greek myth about Icarus and his wings.[15] But it is ultimately about the poetic world of Yi Sang as interpreted and recreated by Rno. The work is unique as the first Korean American play to receive a professional production in Korea and has since been revived there, seen as an exemplary dramatization of Yi Sang and his work. A major reason for the play's acceptance in Korea has to do with the fact that the director of the original production was the famed American Lee

Breuer. In 1998, Rno worked on the play with Breuer when the former was the resident artist for the director's company Mabou Mines. The play was then included in the Seoul Theater Festival, which had previously included works by Breuer. The production was heralded as a meaningful coming together of three experimental artists of different generations and backgrounds.

In addition to memories and myths, trauma functions as a leitmotif in Korean diaspora plays. Immigration can be traumatic, and the sense of displacement felt in the new country can be permanently damaging. As dramatized in this collection, the uprooted disruption caused by the physical move can break up families, worsen mental instability, and unsettle ontological awareness. But the disruptions can also open doors for changes in unimagined ways. The plays in this collection exemplify the various ways in which Korean diasporic communities have recreated themselves out of trauma and continue to evolve. Diana Son's *Satellites* shows a Korean American character whose ethnic identity is only one of multiple facets of her existence. The protagonist, Nina, is a successful architect in her thirties. She is driven, ambitious, and focused on success. She is also a new mother who moves to Brooklyn to start a family lifestyle with her African American husband, Miles, who was adopted by a white family and had graduated from a prestigious university with a degree in computer engineering. Nina is overwhelmed with motherhood and hires a Korean woman, Mrs. Chae, as a nanny. As her new life unfolds, Nina finds herself pulled in multiple directions and is forced to make heart-wrenching decisions in order to set her own moral standards and to define her responsibilities to herself and others. At the end of the play, Nina tells Miles that "we can make up the words ourselves," referring to a lullaby they were trying to remember. The freedom to make up the words symbolizes a new life they can create for the baby. Nina projects a future in which categories can be rewritten and identities can be chosen; she does not need to be bounded by social expectations that derive from racial, ethnic, and gendered divisions. She only looks forward into the future for the sake of her new family.

The collection ends with an epilogue in the form of the Korean Chilean playwright Kyoung H. Park's one-act play, *Mina*. Like the character K in *History K* that begins the collection, Mina struggles with a life that has spiraled out of control. Mina is utterly lost between four cultures: Peruvian, Korean, Japanese, and American. She speaks three different languages in the short piece, which reads like a long confessional purging. She is a victim of colonialism and

globalization, but unlike K, who is hopeless, she is a survivor who imagines finding herself at the end. She may have no roots she can claim, but she can dream of happiness and hope for the future. It is with this optimistic reading of the piece that I present the following seven plays from the Korean diaspora in the Americas.

NOTES

1. Julio Martinez, "My Tired Broke Ass Pontificating Slapstick Funk," *Daily Variety* (March 22, 2000): 16.

2. Euijoon Kim, email to the author, April 12, 2010.

3. For details of the immigration policies, see Won Moo Hurh, *The Korean Americans* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998); Elspeth Cameron, ed., *Multiculturalism and Immigration in Canada: An Introductory Reader* (Toronto: Canadian Scholar's Press, 2004); and In-Jin Yoon, "Understanding the Korean Diaspora from Comparative Perspective," conference paper for the session "Transformation & Prospect toward Multiethnic, Multiracial and Multicultural Society: Enhancing Intercultural Communication," Asia Culture Forum, Kwangju, South Korea, 2006.

4. In Central and South America, Brazil has the largest Korean population (48,000), followed by Argentina (22,000), Mexico (12,000), Guatemala (almost 10,000), and Paraguay (5,000). Populations with fewer than 4,000 were not specified in the report. The data are available in Korean at the Overseas Koreans Foundation website (http://www.korean.net/morgue/status_1_2005.jsp?tCode=status&dCode=0101; accessed June 23, 2010).

5. For details on the phrase "Miracle on the Han River," see Bruce Cumming, *Korea's Place in the Sun: A Modern History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), and Jürgen Kleiner's *Korea: A Century of Change* (Singapore: World Scientific Publishing, 2001).

6. I am using the term "ethnonationalism" as defined by Nadia Y. Kim in *Imperial Citizens: Koreans and Race from Seoul to LA* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

7. Kandice Chu and Karen Shimakawa, eds., "Introduction," in *Orientations: Mapping Studies in the Asian Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 6.

8. Rick Shiomi, "Preface," *Love and RelASIANships: A Collection of Contemporary Asian-Canadian Drama*, vol. 1, ed. Nina Lee Aquino (Toronto: Canadian Drama Publisher, 2009), 4.

9. For details on the history of the EWP, see Yuko Kurahashi, *Asian American Culture on Stage: The History of the East West Players* (New York: Garland, 1999). For a biographical study of Soon-Tek Oh, see my article "Transnational Legitimization of an Actor: The Life and Career of Soon-Tek Oh," *Modern Drama* 48, no. 2 (Summer 2005), 372–406.

10. Terry Hong, "Times Up," *KoreAm Journal* (December 2003), 69.

11. For an expanded study on Jean Yoon and Korean Canadian theater, see my article "'Patient Zero': Jean Yoon and Korean Canadian Theatre," in *Asian Canadian Theatre*, ed. Nina Lee Aquino and Ric Knowles (Toronto: Playwrights Canada, 2011).

12. Young Jean Lee, *Songs of the Dragon Flying to Heaven and Other Plays* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2009). For a discussion of the play *Song of the Dragon Flying to Heaven*, see Karen Shimakawa, "Young Jean Lee's Ugly Feelings about Race and Gender," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 17, no. 1 (March 2007), 89–102.

13. Rhacel S. Parreñas and Lok C. D. Siu, eds., *Asian Diasporas: New Formations, New Conceptions* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).

14. I would add that the trauma of the Korean War has affected Korean immigrants in other parts of the world, including Japan, China, and all of the Americas. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 12.

15. Adam Klasfeld, "*Yi Sang Counts to 13* and *Often I Find That I Am Naked*," *Theatre Mania*, August 15, 2001 (http://www.theatermania.com/new-york/reviews/08–2001/yi-sang-counts-to-13-and-often-i-find-that-i-am-na_1590.html; accessed July 15, 2010).