

IN TRANSIT: An Exploration of Identity

“Where are you from?” is my least favorite question. Whenever anyone asks, I say, “I’m Korean” because of my heritage, or I say, “I’m Georgian” because of my current hometown, or I say “I’m from Hong Kong” because that’s where I’ve lived the longest. Every time, though, I feel like I am lying. I was born in Korea, moved to Hong Kong when I was three, and moved to the United States when I was eleven; no matter where I am, I didn’t quite feel like I am supposed to be there. There’s a phrase for what I’ve experienced: I am a “third culture kid.”

A third culture kid is a child who has grown up in a culture different from their parents’. Although my parents are liberal in their views, they are quite traditionally Korean, a country that values Confucian ideals. My parents never left Korea before college, while I filled up passports before starting middle school. They grew up in strict, racially homogeneous school systems, while I grew up attending Montessori and international schools with students of vastly varying backgrounds. They could not give me exactly what I needed, because they didn’t know exactly what I needed. I felt alone in times of confusion or conflict. I naturally grew up much faster than anyone was prepared to handle—I don’t think I made it easy for them or myself. Eventually, I started to feel like all of this moving around and dissonance of cultures was a more important aspect of my life than I was.

In Transit represents, literally and metaphorically, this feeling of rootlessness and loneliness. Using hard-ground and aquatint intaglio printmaking techniques, I printed various modes of transportation that have been present throughout my life onto my childhood photos; they depict the feeling of being overpowered by my own circumstances. Ultimately, this project was a cathartic expression of my own struggle for identity as both a global citizen and as an individual.

Yoon

GRANDPA AND THE KOREAN HOUSE (or: *what my childhood smells like*)

The Korea I know is warm and smells like freshly cooked rice. It smells like 된장찌개¹ and 김치² and my grandmother's perfume, smells like every 반찬³ she used to make and, at the end of the summer, pack for my family to take back home to Hong Kong. It is happy and stress-free; all those summer days, far from school and responsibilities and the daily grind. All those grapes I ate. Holy shit. I ate so many grapes. And Asian pears, too, sweet as honey; “꿀들었다,”⁴ my mom would exclaim, forking slice after slice into my mouth. I remember making Korean instant coffee for all the adults after breakfast, grandpa and grandma and mom and dad and my three aunts and three uncles, white china cups and dainty little saucers with delicate floral patterns, two sugars, no milk, please.

If I could have a painting of anything, it would be of grandpa's old house; in the front lawn, vegetables and fruits of all colours and sizes sprouted from every corner, greens and reds and purples and oranges dancing around the house, a garden-themed party rooting itself in plain sight. In the middle, near the kitchen door, sat the large fireplace and the cast-iron 밥솥⁵, wafting its scent throughout the neighbourhood. Around the back, there was a bunny in a cage kind of near the back door, and across the lawn from the bunny was a golf-practice-thing, which I don't know the actual name of, but it was like a big tarp hung up against the fence that you could practice your swings on. The whole thing was beautiful. My mom told me that when she was growing up in it there was a peacock in the backyard and the neighbourhood kindergarten class came on a field trip to come look at it⁶. These images of grandpa's house are some of the earliest and fondest that I can remember.

But the Korea I read about in the news—the Korea I see from America—has no tolerance for people like me, the queer girls, the non-traditional girls, the independent girls. Korea values Confucian ideals and is one of the least socially-developed large nations; gender has no place in

¹ Doenjang jjigae: korean soybean paste stew; for me, this is the staple Korean food. It is warm and savoury and whenever I was sick my mom would bring me a bowl of doenjang jjigae with white rice—the only kind of rice I ever wanted to eat—and I'd feel better in no time.

² Kimchi: fermented cabbage, radish, or cucumber; a traditional Korean side dish. There are lots of different kinds, but my favourite—and the best—kind was always 총각김치, the one made out of radishes. A fun fact I just found out about this kind of kimchi is that its nickname in English is “ponytail kimchi.” That's really cute.

³ Banchan: side dish; Koreans eat side dishes with every meal. I've never had a meal without side dishes at home. Sometimes I eat steak with rice and kimchi. (It's really good.)

⁴ This phrase directly translates to “it's full of honey,” which isn't that impressive of a phrase, but it's always been specific to Korean for me; whenever we'd eat especially juicy apples or pears, my mom and my grandmother would refer to them as “having a lot of honey.” I still love hearing them say that. The image in my head when I hear that is one of an apple with a round ball of gooey honey as its core, almost like how the earth is composed of its inner core and its external layer. I love this phrase. I want everyone to start using some kind of English equivalent of it.

⁵ Bap-sot: cast-iron rice cooker, traditional method of cooking rice in Korea; this thing is huge. Like, I mean huge. It's a giant dark-grey piece of iron, kind of like a huge pot, sitting atop a fireplace. I don't know if it's really more like a pot or an oven, but I know that it's big and hot. As a kid I used to worry that someone would fall inside and get cooked with the rice (I pictured it to be less grotesque than it sounds), but that's never happened. (At least, I don't think so. Maybe in a folk tale of some sort.)

⁶ Nobody will tell me whether this story is true or not.

the national dialogue, sexuality is taboo⁷, the most admirable trait in a woman is her ability to settle down with a nice man⁸. The Korea I grew up with and the Korea I know now are vastly different, are two different ends of a spectrum; one is deeply comforting, the other deeply threatening. And I can return to neither one.⁹ I am often plagued with the incessant need to relive those casual summer vacations, only to find that not only have the physical aspects of those memories changed—my grandfather tore down his beautiful property for an industrialised apartment complex¹⁰ --but I, as an individual, have changed, and there is no way for me to go back¹¹. I never had a “childhood home”—I never had one specific house that I felt connected with, because before I could make memories within them, we’d move again.¹² I’ve always been in transit. My grandfather’s house, the house my mother grew up in, the one I loved so dearly, was my only stable point, and this place where I once felt a sense of belonging has now been taken from me. I’m not sure where (or if) I’ll feel that way again.

THE AMERICAN DREAM (or: citizenship laws won't absolve me of the all the guilt weighing on my heart)

At some point in my life, I started saying I’m “American at heart”—I wish I knew what I was talking about. Even before I’d ever been here, I knew it was the ideal, the dream, where I *belonged*. Why was it? Was it because every American movie I watched seemed so perfect, so

⁷ The Korean LGBT pride parade was banned this year, the existence of which I was only informed of very recently. Sometimes when I think about the reality of trans+ and non-straight people in Korea, it makes me debilitatingly sad.

⁸ Undoubtedly, when I go to Korea next summer, my uncle will ask me if I’ve found myself a good boyfriend yet. I will say “no,” even if I have, just to prove to him that I don’t need a “good boyfriend” to be happy.

⁹ In Korea, I am what David C. Pollock and Ruth E. Van Reken, some of the first few researchers of the psychology behind third culture kids, would call a “hidden immigrant”; I look alike, but think different from the dominant culture of the country (Pollock et al., 55). A third culture kid can be defined as any child who has grown up in a culture different from their parents’ culture between the ages of 0 through 18, the crucial times of identity development and self-discovery in life (Pollock et al. 14). Because of my global upbringing, I find it difficult to relate to any one specific culture. “The third culture kid (TCK) frequently builds relationships to all of the cultures [that they have grown up in], while not having full ownership in any” (Pollock et al., 13).

¹⁰ When I saw it for the first time I wanted to cry. It’s really not awful, and he started planting things on the roof so it’s beautiful and lush up there, but I miss running around the garden and seeing the big front gate every time I pulled up to the curb.

¹¹ In *Third Culture Kids: Growing Up Among Worlds*, Erika, a TCK, shares her experience of returning to Singapore, where she grew up, only to find that being there on her own is a vastly different experience than the one she had while growing up with her family. Tight on money and confused on how to sustain herself, she realises that the class privilege that she had as a child contributed to her experience in the country (Pollock et al. 10); I fear, and expect, that if I ever return to Korea or Hong Kong (where I grew up) alone, this will be the case for me as well.

¹² Ann Baker Cottrell, a prominent TCK researcher, found that it was common for TCKs to miss out on certain memories and significant moments in their lives due to the frequency of movement; most TCKs still living with their parents expect to move again in the near future. Something really small that I wish I had growing up is a doorframe with my growing height marked on it in pencil.

idyllic, such an iconic picture of what life should be? Was it because every time I read *Harry Potter*, I'd already learned to automatically assume that most of the characters were white?¹³ Was it the pop music that glorified everyday life, the one so far from my own?¹⁴ Whatever it was, it led me here. Before the end of Year 7¹⁵, around the age of 11, my dad gave me the decision of whether or not I wanted to move from Hong Kong to the United States, the big U.S. of A, to continue my studies and adolescent years¹⁶. I jumped at the opportunity to leave everything I'd ever known; whether good or bad, I thought I was ready for a fresh start¹⁷.

I'm sure I would have fonder memories of Hong Kong if I'd had any real friends there. It was a lot nicer than I probably give it credit for. I loved Montessori school¹⁸, I loved international school, but after a few years of being bullied and subsequently being the bully, I had driven myself into a corner—I was probably very lonely. For some reason, I have trouble remembering what I was thinking back then. All I remember is coming home and wishing that I'd grown up with all the kids at school, so I could be as close to them as they were with each other¹⁹. I can't remember how I felt. I know I was angry a lot. I can't piece together those parts

¹³ I say "almost" because I vehemently insisted that Hermione was a curious, intelligent black girl and Harry was a scrawny, nerdy-looking Asian kid, despite what I actually pictured them as (read: white). I don't know why I did this, kind of like how I don't know why I do anything ever, but I'm going to say it was because I've been invested in social justice since I was a tiny little Yoon. (The reality is probably that I just wanted to be cool and hipster and different from everyone else.)

¹⁴ In hindsight, this would probably have been the same if I'd grown up here, too, because nobody actually lives the way celebrities do, not even celebrities. A lot of the time I wish I could go back in time and smack my young self in the head.

¹⁵ I went to international schools for my whole life, and most of them followed a British curriculum; year 7 is approximately 6th grade in the U.S. school system.

¹⁶ This has been the subject of many an argument. Why are my grades dropping? Why am I not doing my homework? Why did I quit taking Chinese? Don't I know that I'm the reason the family's even here? I've had a lot of pressure placed on me to be successful, and although after middle school my parents stopped talking about it, I still feel that pressure today, an unspoken pressure that expects me to do well and "make a lot of money" and "do big things." My parents are incredibly lax for Asian parents, but even still, I feel like I have to impress the rest of my family. Everyone always expects so much of me. I'm just a girl.

¹⁷ Pollock describes this feeling perfectly: "In the end, many TCKs develop a *migratory instinct* that controls their lives. Along with their chronic rootlessness is a feeling of restlessness: 'Here, where I am today, is temporary. But as soon as I finish my schooling, get a job, or purchase a home, I'll settle down.' Somehow the settling down never quite happens. The present is never enough-- something always seems lacking. An unrealistic attachment to the past, or a persistent expectation that the next place will finally be home, can lead to this inner restlessness that keeps the TCK always moving" (126).

¹⁸ I recommend Montessori school to absolutely everyone. It is incredible. Send your kids to Montessori school. Send your grandkids to Montessori school. Send your friends to Montessori school. Send strangers' kids to Montessori school. Send everyone you know to Montessori school. I learned how to think independently, creatively, and most important, freely in Montessori school.

¹⁹ Pollock, in *Third Culture Kids*, notes that many TCKs experience boredom or frustration with what they deem to be "shallow" relationships in their lives; this can be attributed, he says, to the fact that the brief nature of their lifestyles does not accommodate for deeper, more intimate relationships (133). There are five levels of relationships, he says: the superficial level of small talk, the "still safe" level of no-risk facts, the judgmental level of political, moral, and religious beliefs, the emotional level of honesty and shared feelings, and the deepest level, the disclosure level, one of shameful confessions and dark secrets and painful failures. In my experience, most of my relationships have barely reached the judgmental level.

of me. While I wished I'd grown up in the same place my whole life, I didn't want it to be Hong Kong. I just wanted to travel back in time and be born somewhere and stay there forever. I want a lot of things that I can't have. I never felt like I belonged there-- I was ready to belong to America.

Then I was here—just like that. I came in the middle of sixth grade, startling my peers by arriving in the middle of a school year. It wasn't, and still isn't, as beautiful as the movies made it seem. While I adjusted quickly to the Western world, I had been tricked by America's "single story," as Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie describes in her TEDTalk *The Danger of the Single Story*, only ever seeing the U.S. from one vantage point, I hadn't remembered that, like anywhere else, it would have its flaws. Sometimes I beat myself up over the fact that I grew up thinking this way, because it's just like my mom says: I think like an American²⁰. I guess that's what it means to be "American at heart." Every time she says that, I feel worse and worse about the way I've almost abandoned my motherland²¹.

This lack of connection to my Korean heritage fuels my overwhelming guilt about being here, in the United States. Korean laws prevent dual citizenships for citizens under the age of 65²², which leaves me with three viable options. One: give up my Korean citizenship for an American one; two: give up living in America and return to Korea; or three: stay in America on a green card, unable to vote or have any say in national and local affairs. None of these options are necessarily appealing, and none of them will remedy the shame I feel for having no significant connection to my home, one with such rich history and tradition that I don't know enough about²³.

So in this fashion, I am caught between worlds, stuck in the middle, not quite Korean and not quite American and not quite Hong Kongese²⁴; not exactly any of the places I've been. And

Only recently have I learned to more quickly adapt to new locations and cultivate stronger relationships in a shorter amount of time, reaching the emotional level much more rapidly than I knew how to before. I believe in sharing your feelings; I believe in emotional honesty. This is probably evident from my sculpture piece "TALK ABOUT YOUR FEELINGS," which takes center stage in my common room as I type this. I think it's important to share these things with one another.

²⁰ It's funny how that works. My parents think in Korean, while I think in English; whenever we talk to each other, at least one person is doing some internal translation to get their message across. I never thought about it that way before.

²¹ Reading back on this, I feel stupid that I haven't engaged with traditional and modern Korean culture more; it's not about whether or not I live in Korea, it's about whether or not I'm actively trying to learn and be one with my home culture. I just wish that it wasn't so hard and that I wasn't so distant. Sometimes I wish I'd grown up in Korea, but I wonder how different I'd be if that were the case.

²² I'm not exactly sure how this works, but I know that Korea is very selective about who it grants dual citizenships to. I hope that, in Yoon-fashion, I'm able to find some kind of loophole around this and weasel myself into a dual citizenship between the U.S. and Korea. I have to figure out how before I'm 22, though.

²³ Once again, this is a staple of the TCK profile—knowing so little about our home cultures, TCKs often struggle to re-patriate when (or if) they return to their home countries (Pollock 96).

²⁴ A common dilemma amongst TCKs, says Pollock, is the challenge of confused loyalties; "although their expanded worldview is a great benefit, it can also leave TCKs with a sense of confusion about such complex things as politics, patriotism, and values" (90).

where do I belong if not the places I've been? I feel weird being here, but not weirder than I'd feel anywhere else. I don't feel quite right, no matter where I go²⁵.

HEIGHTENED SENSES (or: *I swear I can almost touch the parts of my childhood I miss most*)

Sometimes when I wake up in the middle of the night and the ceiling fan is quietly whirring and my father has fallen asleep watching Korean reality shows and I can smell the remains of dinner, I swear I am six again, I swear I am a child, slightly jet-lagged from the plane ride or perhaps whose sleep schedule is suffering from staying up too late watching **짱구**²⁶ on the big television in grandpa's living room, snoring softly on the brown leather couch that makes my back hurt when I lay on it for too long.

Sometimes I can picture us arriving at my grandfather's home, always late at night after the 3-hour flight from Hong Kong. I remember Mango the mutt, who so diligently barked at us through the gate, terrifying my mother each time without fail²⁷. I remember the house always being just the right temperature when we walked in; my bones defrosted and cooled with the seasons amidst hugs and kisses, "oh my goodness look how big you are now"s, cheeks flushed from being pinched and prodded. This arriving and greeting and hugging are fresh in my mind, as if it were yesterday²⁸.

Sometimes I think I can smell the crisp morning air from the park near my grandparents' house. I remember the winter morning I woke up at 5am with my grandparents to walk those trails, to climb those stairs, to welcome the sun into a new day. Sometimes I am amazed by my **할머니**²⁹ and **할아버지**³⁰, whose dedication to this daily routine surpasses their old age and weak bones. I miss those gentle hours, warm tea on cold lips, holding my grandmother's hand as she insisted she didn't need to take a break, that she could feel my strength being channeled into her own frail legs, climbing up and up and up right by my side. I don't think I've ever held anyone's hands as tightly as I did her hand; I'm coming to realise that I needed her just as much as she did me³¹.

But I am here, not there. It has been three years since I held my grandmother's hand, swollen from her increasingly worse arthritis. I haven't met my new baby cousin, Eunho, who is no longer a baby but a toddler. I haven't watched Junho, his brother, my favourite little cousin,

²⁵ In *Third Culture Kids*, the term "cultural chameleon" is used to describe those who adapt and "change colours" to fit in with their peers day-by-day; however, TCK chameleons "may never develop true cultural balance anywhere," and will feel like an outsider wherever they go (101).

²⁶ Shinchan: a cartoon targeted at adults that my grandma hated. I was such a little brat after watching this show. No wonder she hated it so much.

²⁷ Mango was a harmless dog. I do remember that every time we got there, though, we'd have to call my grandpa and ask him to tie Mango up so my mother could move her luggage without having a heart attack. He barked at us anyway.

²⁸ A weird thing about this is the fact that I remember greeting certain people's faces, but since I was so young, I have no idea who they are or what connection I have to them. Sometimes I'll think I'm related to people who were really just close friends of my grandparents, or perhaps the daughter of my mom's highschool friends.

²⁹ Hal-meo-ni: grandmother

³⁰ Hal-ah-beo-ji: grandfather

³¹ My grandmother, who has beat cancer six times, is the strongest and kindest woman I know. If I had a role model, it would be her.

start school. I haven't hidden my grandfather's pack of cigarettes in an attempt to get him to quit smoking. Wherever I go, I'm missing someplace else.³²

THE COLD TUB (or: *running around naked with a bunch of Korean kids*)

This part of my childhood has always been the biggest culture shock for my white peers: the part with giant tubs and giant showers and naked women relaxing and soaking and sighing their sorrows out with the heat of the warm water. Korean saunas will always feel like home³³. It was always about the cold tub; I know it sounds counterproductive, but bearing the freezing cold water, holding your breath, feeling yourself adjust to the icy temperature, gloating to yourself; nothing is more rewarding. I used to pretend I couldn't hear my mom announcing our departure or telling me to stop moving around between the tubs, instead choosing to submerge my head underneath the surface of the water for as long as I possibly could³⁴.

These memories are some of my favourite. Napping on the mats with hard blocks (I don't know what these are actually called but I can assure they're more comfortable than they sound) as pillows, eating boiled eggs with salt, those familiar pink outfits, running around upstairs with the comic books and coming downstairs and having mom scrub my back with a 때밀이³⁵. I think this sauna may be closed now. I keep losing parts of myself.

NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE (or: *I used to overreact; I still do, but I used to, too*)

I probably owe my life to the lady who got the fishbone out of my neck. I don't remember why, but I was in Korea alone, my dad having left for a business trip³⁶ after dropping me off and my mom due to arrive a few days later. I was eating fish by myself, insisting that I could pick out the fish bones myself. Obviously I couldn't³⁷. I started choking, the tiny needle having lodged itself firmly in my throat, and I started crying about how I didn't want to die without seeing my parents. Grandma had to call the 약국아주머니 (the pharmacy lady) to "save my life"; she showed up ten minutes later, smacked my back, and told me to drink some juice. I was fine, but I was convinced I was going to die. Home is and has always been where my parents are; wherever we had to go next, I'd follow them there, like a lost puppy. This was the day I

³² Everywhere I go is "hello"s and "goodbye"s. I should be better at these by now, but I've come to realise that they never get any easier.

³³ When we moved to Georgia, my family soon discovered a Korean sauna not far from our house; it made the move a lot easier. I admit that it wasn't quite the same, but it was a warm welcome.

³⁴ I think I still do this when I take baths and my mom tells me we have to go somewhere. I haven't really matured all that much.

³⁵ Ddae-mil-ee: I literally have no idea what the English word for this is. It's like a rough thing that you scrub your skin with and, no, it's not a loofah.

³⁶ Something to note about my dad is that he was a very busy man for the majority of my developmental years. Once, when we lived in Hong Kong, I think he left for a business trip for 364 days; these days he tries to compensate for his absence by being lenient with me. It's strange to watch.

³⁷ "I told you so," my grandma said before trying to help me. I've always been *that* fiercely independent.

realised what a shitty daughter I'd been; my whole life, I'd gone out of my way to go against their best judgment, blatantly ignoring their advice and following my own heart³⁸.

I've always been overly rebellious and too curious for my own good; the poster child for "a goddamn handful." As a little girl, my parents and I would argue almost daily about aspects of my conduct or my unwillingness to take "no" for an answer. This incident, though, made me realise how much I actually appreciate my parents.

When I was little, maybe six or seven, I'd get a little too introspective at night. My parents would tuck me in, tell me goodnight, turn off the light, close the bedroom door—but not all the way, just the way I liked it—and I'd lay there in the darkness, reflecting on my day and thinking about whatever it was that my young self could conjure up. Eventually—and I still don't know why—I'd always get to thinking about the temporal nature of all living things, of the cruel reality of the fact that everyone would eventually all die, including my parents. I didn't want them to die before they knew I was sorry for being such a brat. I cried about that a lot. Once, my dad walked in, alarmed to see his daughter crying in bed for no discernible reason. I can still see the look on his face, the concern and fear and worry radiating off his face in frown lines, all the love he had for me visible in all the creases of his skin. I wish I'd been a better daughter to them.

THE MILK STORY (or: *all I want now is happiness for you and me*)

This is the one story I swear I can actually remember, even though I must have been too young to have actually memorized the details. I can see my mom and myself sitting at the dining room table...me doing my homework, my mom minding her own business. I used to eat cereal after school every day. A spoonful of milk in my mouth, cheeks blown up like a cartoon chipmunk, I grinned at my mom over my math problems, only to have her reach over, and, hand on either side of my face, squeeze, sending milk flying everywhere. This is the iconic image of my childhood. This is what I think of when I hear the words "carefree" or "happy." I wish I could relive this moment over and over again.³⁹

THE PRESENT AGE (or: *I actually still have no idea what I'm doing and any semblance of stability you may perceive from my conduct is probably a fortunate coincidence*)

♪ I don't think I'm ever gonna figure it out ♪⁴⁰

³⁸ Probably the most prominent example of this was me bringing home friends without asking permission first. When I saw all the kids at my school simply going over to one another's houses at random, I was upset that I couldn't do the same; I wanted to fit in, so I started bringing people home without asking, too.

³⁹ Taiye Selasi, author, says that we should ask people, "Where are you a local?" instead of "Where are you from?" I am a local in my mother's laugh.

⁴⁰ Smith, Elliott. "I Don't Think I'm Ever Gonna Figure It Out." Speed Trials 7". 1996. MP3.

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