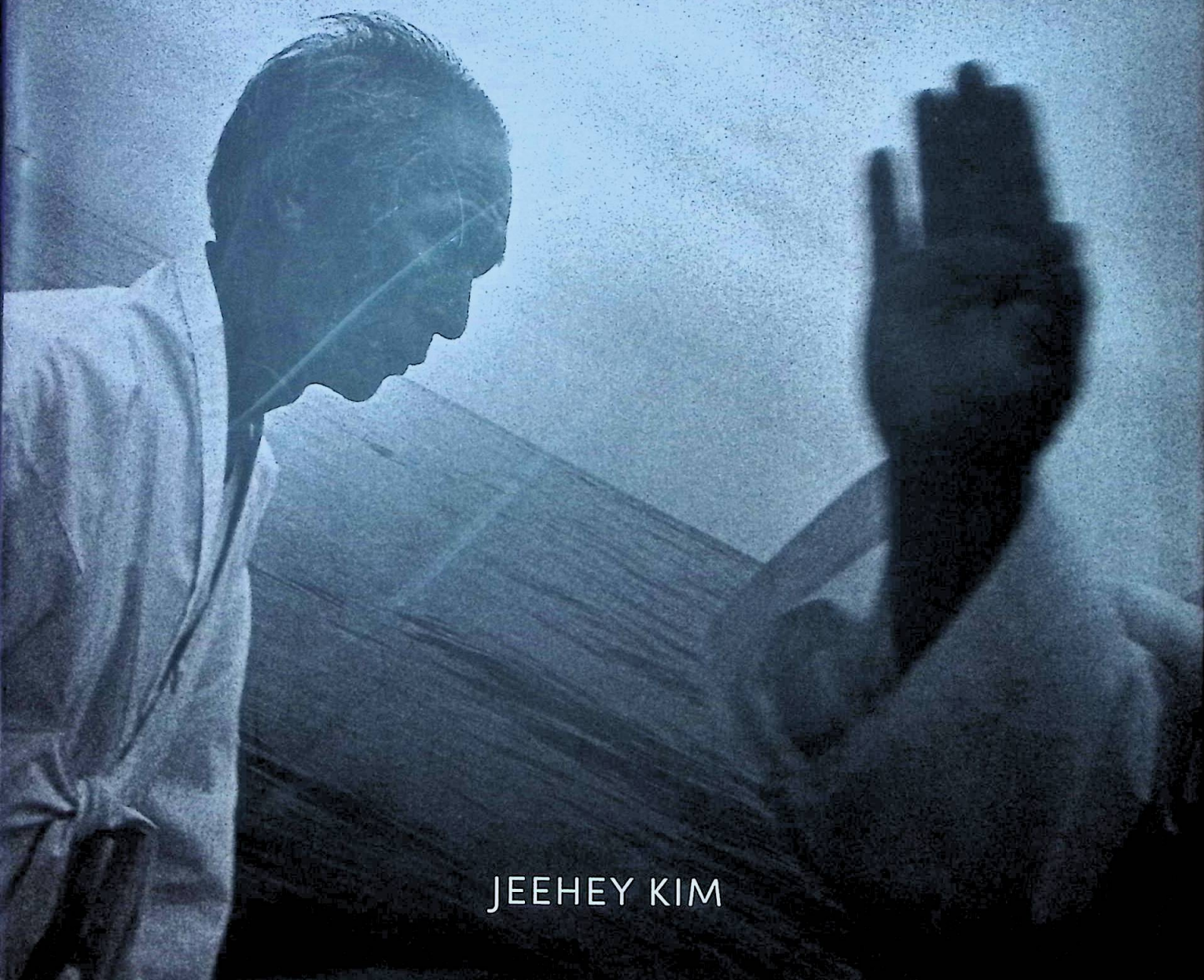


PHOTOGRAPHY and KOREA



JEEHEY KIM

121 Oksun Kim,
BNC_8709CZ, digital
C-print from the
series *Berlin Portraits*,
2018.

to remain in Germany, a right held by European migrant workers.¹⁴ Around 10,000 people signed in order to support their protest. The 24 women posing for Kim's photographs refused to be depicted as victims of the state mobilization of labour, as they chose where they would work and fought for their right to work despite being pressured to quit.¹⁵ The large scale of Kim's photographs (180 × 150 cm) and the impassive expressions of her subjects evince their dignity and pride in their five-decade lives as immigrants. The title of the series, *Berlin Portraits*, raises the question of who represents the city of Berlin. Kim's photographs reflect the history not only of the Korean diaspora but of Germany, in whose cities many immigrants have made their homes and become crucial actors in modern German history. The series can be situated within the genealogy of German portrait photographs, from August Sander's portraits of the German populace of the 1920s to contemporary photographers known for deadpan portraits, including Thomas Ruff and Candida Höfer.

The Korean Diaspora in the Americas

According to a Korean government report, as of 2011, 112,980 Koreans were known to be living in Latin America. Brazil has the largest Korean diaspora, with around 50,000, followed by Argentina, Mexico, Paraguay and Chile.¹⁶ The first wave of Korean immigration to the Americas began when thousands of Koreans were contracted as labourers on Hawaiian sugar plantations and henequen farms in Yucatán in the early twentieth century.¹⁷ Some of the Korean labourers in Mexico migrated to Cuba in the 1920s to find better-paying jobs on sugar plantations there. Photography played an instrumental role in establishing Korean immigration in the early twentieth century. Picture marriage (*sajin gyeolhon*) was the only way for Korean male migrant labourers in Hawaii to establish their own families.¹⁸ Women in Korea and men in Hawaii exchanged portrait photographs to introduce themselves to each other. Once they agreed to wed, they would register their marriage in Korea so that the bride could apply for a spousal visa to emigrate to the United States. After Japan colonized the peninsula in 1910, 'picture brides' (*sajin sinbu*) obtained visas as Japanese citizens. The term 'picture bride' refers to the Korean and Japanese female immigrants who married through the exchange of



122 Korean War prisoners on board transport from Asturias to India, 1954.

photographs. Once the picture brides disembarked in U.S. ports, many of them had difficulty finding their husbands, as the men were often a lot older than the photographs suggested. The cultural phenomenon of picture marriage reveals that interracial marriage was unimaginable in early twentieth-century America, and that heterosexual patriarchy persisted in the familial imaginary of the Korean immigrants. Photography facilitated the migration as well as the settlement of Korean people in the United States.

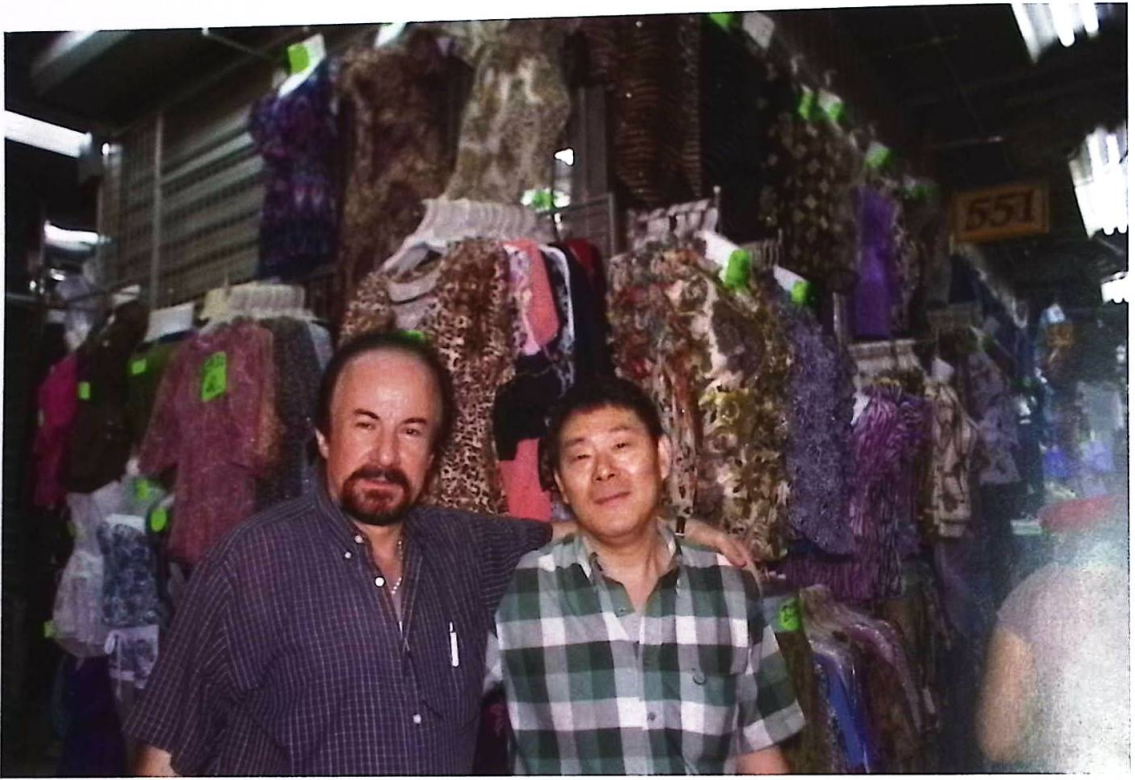
Following the Korean War (1950–53), 76 Korean prisoners of war chose to settle in neutral countries rather than in North or South Korea. After a two-year stay in India, the chair country of the Neutral Nations Repatriation Commission, fifty Koreans immigrated to Brazil, twelve went to Argentina and the rest remained in India or returned to one of the Koreas.¹⁹ In a photography album donated to the National Institute of Korean History by Seon-Jae Yi, the wife of Ki-Cheol Ji, a man who chose to remain in India, we see Korean prisoners of war on a troopship travelling to India (illus. 122), and Koreans who chose Brazil as their destination learning Portuguese. The division of the Korean peninsula gave rise to a far-flung diaspora.

As they did with West Germany, the Chung-Hee Park regime sought to relieve the oversupply of labour in the Korean domestic



123 Suwon Lee,
San Ruperto, 2004,
archival pigment
print.

market by encouraging its citizens to immigrate to Latin America as farm labourers. Suwon Lee (1977–) was born in Venezuela three years after her Korean parents immigrated: her father had been invited by the Venezuelan government as a martial-arts teacher.²⁰ Lee had herself photographed while sitting on a bus (illus. 123). *San Ruperto*, the title of the work, refers to the vintage buses used as public transportation for working-class people in Venezuela.²¹ Lee explores how she appears among other residents of her mother country. Born to a Korean immigrant family, she often finds herself standing out in Venezuelan society due to her Asian features, but in this photograph, no one seems to pay attention to her – perhaps most of the other passengers are migrant workers from outside Venezuela. Riding the *San Ruperto* bus, Lee intervenes into the ways in which people are categorized in society. Race, gender and class are intertwined to establish stereotypes about a group of people, which triggers anxiety and fear over one's identity as a minority. Lee made a series of photographs recording



the Korean diaspora in Venezuela, *Kyopo* (overseas compatriots), in which she tries to make visible the community of Korean immigrants of Venezuela, whose numbers have been decreasing since its peak in the 1970s and '80s. Most of the photographs are images of families, showing generations of the Korean diaspora and preserving their history for both Koreans and Venezuelans. The Korean families allowed Lee to take pictures of them, their homes and communal events. She photographed a wedding reception where kimchi was served alongside Western dishes, while zooming in on the photograph of a bride and a groom accompanied by their mothers wearing hanbok, the traditional Korean dress. She also visited a business district in Caracas called the 'Korean corridor', where many Koreans made their living through garment and jewellery sales (illus. 124). Her projects were made between 2004 and 2014. Along with so many others, she fled the country in 2016 during the deteriorating economic conditions and ensuing political crises. The smiling Koreans in Lee's photographs left their homes, uprooting themselves from the country in which they had worked so hard to settle. *Kyopo* refers to overseas Koreans;

124 Suwon Lee,
Mr Kim (The Cemetery), 2010,
archival pigment
print.

125, 126 Yong Soon
Min, *Mother Load*,
1996, mixed media.



the country of residence is added as a prefix to the term. For example, *Jaemi Kyopo* (overseas Korean in the USA) or *Jaeil Kyopo* (overseas Korean in Japan). The title of Lee's series does not use a specific prefix, foreshadowing the yet-to-be-determined fate of these overseas Koreans who were to become *Kyopo* somewhere else. The photographer installed the photographs under primary-coloured fluorescent tubes that distort the appearance of visitors to the exhibition space. Titled *Clash*, the installation commented on the tension between external and internal elements that construct personal identity.²²

In the USA, the hyphenated identity of the Korean diaspora serves to subvert an impulse to essentialize and marginalize a particular community based on ethnicity and race. As people willing to remain interstitial, Asian American artists have been creating a space to intervene into two distinct cultures, languages and histories while at the same time giving rise to contemplation of how diasporic artists can redefine both American-ness and Korean-ness. Yong Soon Min (1953–) has been intervening in the ways in which colonialism and imperialism sustain the flow of migration. She often uses her own family photographs to address the history of Korean immigration to the United States. *American Friend* is a drawing based on a photograph of her father and his colleagues. Her father is seated in the front row of people next to an American soldier for whom her father worked as an interpreter. The American helped her father to study in the United States, to which her family emigrated a few years later to unite with her father. Min recontextualizes the old souvenir photograph by stencilling letters at the bottom, which become the title of the work. A Korean text written vertically on the right wall behind the group reads as follows:

Dear our generous friend! The friend who helped our immigration to the United States after getting to know our father during the Korean War! The friend who helped our mother to find a job in the US army stationed in Seoul following our father's departure to the US! Thus we were able to subsist during the difficult period after the war. Dear friend! You sent Syngman Rhee the great leader to us. And you helped Korean political development through making the military dictators Chung-Hee Park and Doo-Hwan Chun the presidents

of the country. You were trying hard to help Korea in its economic and military power. Moreover, a precious gift of nuclear weapon . . . how can we not realize all this gratitude? We cannot take them for granted.

The 'American Friend' is both her father's American friend and the United States itself, each of which changed the course of her family's life and made a great impact on the history of the peninsula. Inspired by the art and culture of the San Francisco Bay area during the 1970s, Min engages the strategy of appropriation as well as conceptual artistic intervention into the dynamics of text and image. By recontextualizing her father's old photograph, she reveals the U.S. hegemony overshadowing the history of Korean immigration, including her family's.

Mother Load is a four-piece installation of fabric bearing reproductions of historic and personal photographs (illus. 125 and 126).²³ Min made different forms of *bojagi*, a Korean wrapping cloth used mostly by women for carrying clothes and other items, or *bottari*, the items wrapped with *bojagi*.²⁴ One of the *bojagi* is printed with old photographs showing Korean history and eminent figures, and, in a style typical of *bojagi*, is made from patches of leftover fabric after making a blanket or a *hanbok*, which her mother carried to the United States. By reproducing the historic figures, all of whom are male, onto a feminine object, Min evinces the patriarchal structure of both colonial and imperial history with a gendered aspect of diaspora. Min also made a *bottari* from half-cut personal items, including shoes and underwear, with a *bojagi* printed with photographs from twentieth-century historical events key to the Korean diaspora in the United States, including the protests of Korean Americans against the U.S. involvement in the Gwangju May Uprising of 1980 and the LA riots of 1992. This *bottari* suggests another possible migration or displacement, while another *bottari* is unwrapped or only a wrapping cloth is presented. Looking at the four pieces from left to right, *Mother Load* traces the temporal trajectory of Korean women's migration from the colonial period throughout the late twentieth century.

Min also foregrounds her body as a battleground of identity politics. In *Make Me*, she created bifurcated self-portraits (illus. 127), each one bearing a phrase that addresses stereotypes about Asian



women in the USA: Model Minority, Exotic Emigrant, Assimilated Alien and Objectified Other. Each phrase serves as a caption that explicates Min's photographic performance as she distorts her face by pulling up one eye as if mimicking the slanted eyes of Asian women (Objectified Other) or covering an eye or her mouth as if half-blinded or silenced (Assimilated Asian). Her identity is always fragmented as an Asian immigrant through exoticism, derisive stereotypes, forced assimilation and the fantasy of a model minority.

Korean adoptees in Europe and North America shed a different light on diasporic identities. I once explored the palimpsest of their artworks in various media in an exhibition.²⁵ The transnational and transracial history of adoption of South Korean children extends from helping children displaced by war to the adoption of abandoned Asian children throughout the 1960s and '70s, when the adoption of Black children by white families was brought to a halt in the United States.²⁶ South Korea gained a reputation as the biggest exporter of babies until the early 1990s; its peak year was 1986, when 6,188 children were adopted by U.S. families.²⁷ From the early 1990s, Korean adoptees began to establish their own networks and organizations,

127 Yong Soon Min, *Make Me*, 1989, four-part bifurcated self-portraits.

128 Susan Sponsler, *Piecing Together Our Histories: A Korean Adoptee Quilt*, 1999, cyanotype and cotton muslin.

This collage is a collection of blue-toned photographs and text panels. It features numerous portraits of children and young adults, interspersed with various symbols and text. Key elements include:

- Maps:** A map of the United States in the top left and another map in the top right.
- Flags:** The flag of South Korea on the left side and the flag of the United States on the right side.
- Portraits:** Numerous individual portraits of children and young people, some with captions.
- Text Panels:** Several panels containing text, likely biographical information or names of individuals.
- Other Symbols:** A circular symbol with four trigrams (resembling the Korean flag's trigrams) and a circular yin-yang-like symbol.

The overall layout is a grid-like arrangement of these elements, creating a dense and visually rich composition.



129 Susan Sponsler,
*motherless/
mothered*, 1997,
gelatin prints.

complicating the discourse on the Korean diaspora. Most of them grew up in white suburbs with little or no contact with the Korean community, while their sense of kinship is divided between their birth and their adoptive parents.

Just as photography played an instrumental role in the migration of picture brides, so have adoptees been introduced to their new families through photographs. Following the Korean War, the American popular media encouraged adoption of war orphans.²⁸ In 1955, *Jet*, a magazine focused on news, culture and entertainment of particular interest to the African American community and which had been published since 1951, ran a story on mixed-race orphans in South Korea, hoping that African Americans might consider adopting these children.²⁹ Myung-Duk Joo's *The Mixed Names* (1969) documents mixed-race orphans of Korea at the Holt Adoption Agency established

in Seoul in 1955 by Harry Holt and his wife, Bertha.³⁰ The photographs, mostly taken at orphanages or adoption agencies, are the only link to connect the adoptees to the peninsula, as they have little or no memory of their birth country. Susan Sponsler (1958–), who was adopted in Korea by a U.S. war veteran,³¹ created a quilt reproducing the photographs of Korean adoptees before their displacement and their current images with their American names (illus. 128). Four hundred adoptees provided Sponsler with their photographs and other personal information, including birth dates and Korean names.³² Childhood photographs serve to memorialize many joyous moments, but for the adoptees, they demarcate the critical moment when their lives changed forever. Photography effects displacements. Sponsler tries to make the history of the adoptees visible, destabilizing the ways in which ethnic identity structures the discourse on diaspora through revealing the transracial identity of the adoptees. In *motherless/mothered*, Sponsler positions her first-grade school picture at the centre of the work, while a photograph of her adoptive parents is above and below her is an image of her adoptive mother (illus. 129). To our left is an image of a couple in traditional Korean wedding attire, and to our right is a woman wearing a *hanbok*, their faces printed in negative. As Sponsler does not have photographs of her birth parents, she appropriates generic images of a Korean couple to allude to the Korean parents she does not remember. She pasted into the background of her school picture the following text:

People say they can't imagine not knowing who your real mother is. They think that my real mother is my birth mother. I feel that my real mother is my adoptive mother. Perhaps the truth is that alone, neither one can be my real mother; they are two halves of one mother. One who gave me life and made me motherless, and one who mothered me and gave my life love.³³

The artist is questioning what it means to have two mothers, as she has been asked many times about her 'real' mother, which leads her to question who her 'real' self is.

Unlike members of the Korean diaspora who have acquired citizenship in their countries of residence, a number of people

working or studying in foreign countries, along with undocumented migrants, constitute a substantial part of the diasporic history. As an immigrant under the protection of DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals), KangHee Kim (1991–) goes beyond the Korean diasporic discourse, intervening in the imaginary of diaspora with a politics of space for those who are forbidden to travel under the special condition of their immigration. During the ten or so years when she could not leave the USA due to her immigration status, she created photographic scenes through which she could make imaginary journeys. While running errands on the streets of New York City, the photographer fabricated exciting moments through photography rather than waiting for ideal moments to capture. In her series *Street Errands*, she combines banal urbanscapes with a palm tree or a sky turning pink at dusk. Using Photoshop, Kim made numerous dreamscapes which she then shared on Instagram. Her images combining street scenes of New York with the natural landscapes of Hawaii or Colorado garnered enormous attention from people who pine to escape from their daily routines but cannot afford to for financial or other reasons. These idyllic images bear the traces of the artist's manipulation, as the scenes speak to the marooned state in which she and some of her viewers find themselves.

The Japanese Diaspora in Korea

In Chapter Three, I explored photographic practices that intervene in the complex issue of identity for Korean residents in Japan, most of whom migrated to the island as colonial subjects before the Korean peninsula was divided. In this section, I will focus on photographers who call attention to the complicated life experiences of Japanese women in Korea.

Since 2004, Jong-Wook Kim (1959–) has been making photographic documents of the Japanese women who migrated to South Korea with their Korean husbands after the liberation of Korea in 1945. As part of its assimilation policy beginning in the 1920s, the Japanese colonial government encouraged marriage between Koreans and Japanese, epitomized by the marriage of the princess Masako Nashimoto (Korean name: Bang-Ja Yi) to Crown Prince Euimin of Korea. Around 5,000 Japanese women left their home towns for