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Literature as Engagement: Teaching African American Literature to Korean Students

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Teaching African American literature to Korean students has special cultural implications regarding Koreans' perception of and attitudes toward African Americans, especially after the Los Angeles riots of 1992. Although many of the problems which caused the riots derived from the racial history of the United States, the media played an influential role in focusing upon and contributing toward creating and perpetuating the myth of Black-Korean conflict, which Elaine Kim rightly termed "another case of visual media racism" in her *Newsweek* article soon after the riots. Kim claimed that the media "diverted attention away from a long tradition of racial violence that was not created by African-Americans or Korean-Americans" and the so-called Black-Korean problem is "a decontextualized manifestation of a much larger problem." During and after the riots, the major media and some European Americans discussed the conflicts as if they were watching a "dogfight" or a "boxing match" (E. Kim, "Home" 3)¹ which enraged many Koreans.

These attitudes remind me of the "battle royal" scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, in which young blindfolded "shines" are forced to fight against each other in the ring and later struggle for the prize money of fake gold coins on the electrified mat for the amusement of the white audience (27). The parties in conflict at the end of the twentieth century are the so-called "problem peo-

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ple,” the Blacks and some Asian horde, pitted against each other “over the crumbs of a broken society” (E. Kim, “Self-Defense”). Like the boys in the battle royal scene, both groups are blindfolded symbolically with “white cloth”; instead of hitting the white audience who put them in the ring, African Americans attack and scapegoat Koreans as “middleman minorities” (Pyong Gap Min, qtd. in Chang and Diaz-Veizades 35). This view is supported by Cornel West, a leading African American scholar and activist, who points out in his interview with me on Black-Korean relations that “they [African Americans] strike out at those [Korean Americans] who are closest to them and those whom they view as a symbol of power which they do not have” (M. Kim 316).

Without acknowledging the real source of their bitterness, Korean Americans and African Americans were represented as being at war as both victims and perpetrators of violence against one another during and after the Los Angeles riots which were termed “America’s first multi-ethnic riots” (Chang and Diaz-Veizades 6). What could be done to improve the bad relations between these two communities caused by a bitter portrayal of misunderstanding and hatred? As Amritjit Singh pointed out in his “Op-Ed” piece in the *Chicago Tribune* after the riots, “we need to fight not one another, but against discriminatory practices such as redlining which have hindered minorities” (27). Singh also suggested that “by learning more about the long experience of Blacks and Native Americans in fighting discrimination, all Asian American immigrants might develop a sense of responsible connection to the national history they embrace through their new citizenship” (27). This corresponds with the views of Ronald Takaki, who called for new urgency in the pursuit of a more accurate history: “what is lacking is historical context. . . . How can African Americans and Korean Americans work it out unless they learn about each other’s cultures, histories, and also economic situations?” (5).

The outcome of the riots painfully reminded us how ignorant different racial or ethnic groups are of each other’s history and culture, and this ignorance hinders the coalition among colored peoples because “the conflict between ethnic groups can be conceptualized as developing in the ‘border zones’ where the two cultures meet, intermingle, and sometimes clash” (William Tierney, qtd. in

Chang and Diaz-Veizades 38). The result of a survey of African American and Korean American perceptions of inter-group relations, conducted by Edward Chang and Jeannette Diaz-Veizades, proves this. For both groups, the most important reasons for tensions concern cultural differences under the category of “communication and culture,” and the “attitudes” of one group toward the other. An African American comments that “they [Korean Americans] are already programmed when they came to this country not to trust Blacks” (39).

As citizens of a secluded nation in East Asia, Koreans have historically been proud of an exclusive and apparently homogeneous blood tradition that claims “single nation, single ethnicity” and have a tendency not to accept or be open to “others.” By and large, most Koreans have prejudices against African Americans that have become a fixture of Korean perception both at home and abroad. A survey on racial and national preferences of Korean college students shows that Africans and African Americans are the least preferred groups for Koreans either as friends or as marriage partners (Chang “Survey” 111-12).² This is also supported by a short pre-reading questionnaire I gave to the students in my American ethnic literature course to assess their perception and understanding of African Americans, which would serve as a baseline to measure any changes that took place after they studied African American literature.³ As anticipated, the responses to the questionnaire showed that young Korean students have many negative stereotypes of African Americans.

The fact that most of the young college students who responded to these surveys did not have much direct contact with African Americans suggests that the negative images of Koreans toward African Americans are heavily influenced by the images and representations in global media. As Karen Ross notes:

If black communities are constantly framed by media text within a narrow repertoire of meaning, the viewer who does not have first-hand experiences of those communities will have no reason to challenge them since their frame of reference would not include opposing conceptions of blackness. (xx)

Through the reductive process of media, the repetition of certain images of members of a particular race is ingrained in people's minds, and the real danger of global media is in its power to transform these images from being merely symbolic to being accepted as reality. In fact, these images can be more powerful and more real than reality itself for those groups of people who have no first-hand contact with African Americans.

As the global community grows, the distance between different peoples grows smaller, and Koreans and African Americans are no longer free to maintain their perceptions about one another in isolation. For the past few years my American ethnic literature course at the Catholic University of Korea has focused on African American writers, with the goal of promoting Korean students' understanding of African Americans.⁴ Anyone who has tried to teach a foreign novel to students who are studying a second language would agree that the task is a formidable one, but the challenge increases when a teacher must get students to see beyond their stereotypes to understand the complicated nuances of the culture that a novel represents. The most difficult aspect of teaching African American literature to Korean students is to challenge the society and system that have historically supported a popular view of America. In the first part of this essay, I relate my experience of teaching *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison in an American novel course, and in the second part, in an American ethnic literature course, and explore how it may be taught to challenge the typical Korean students' frame of reference, and how the literary texts can be supplemented by historical, social, and comparative works to combat negative stereotypes.

***The Bluest Eye* in an American Novel Course**

Through post-World-War-II US neo-colonialism, Koreans have predominantly been fed an image of America that contains only the historical highlights of its idealism. After the Korean War, the Korean government aided the US in promoting the American image abroad; in a McCarthy-like movement, anti-American sentiments were denounced as "communist." Education, an effective distributor of propaganda, molded students to hold up the US as the de-

mocratic ideal. This created a curriculum in schools that excluded the ugly, undemocratic aspects of African American history. Thus, in the Korean version of US history, as in the master narratives of the US at home, “black folks were compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity during slavery and the long years of racial apartheid” (hooks *Killing* 35). The word “America” in the minds of Koreans is associated with “white” race and culture, and, in fact, some Korean immigrants confessed that they were surprised to encounter so many colored people on US streets when they first arrived. As a result, Koreans’ views of African Americans reflect one-dimensional Western representations: they are lazy and dangerous, doomed to a ghetto existence, shackled by their own limits and irresponsible behavior.

In order to bring to light the polarity of US society, I gave my students the task of reading Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* in conjunction with F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. Juxtaposing the rich and frivolous white world of the roaring twenties with the poverty-stricken and depressed black world of Pecola, the tragic young protagonist of *The Bluest Eye*, instigated an active class discussion, quite a contrast to the usual reluctance which normally characterizes students in a foreign literature class. Teaching these two works comparatively brought out the conflict between America’s democratic ideals and its practice. Students began to see that US democracy, despite its pretensions of equality, was a selective concept throughout history, and that there were two Americas, one black and the other white. As Benjamin Ringer and Elinor Lawless note, “the Founding Fathers sanctified two political models: a ‘colonial’ model that upheld liberty for the Anglo-American population and a ‘colonialist’ model that sanctioned the oppression of ‘others.’ America’s historic treatment of its racial minorities has been both an expression and a product of the dialectical tension between these two models” (xiv).

Both novels approach the glamour of an American dream; however, while *Gatsby* yearns for wealth and social standing, Pecola only wants to be “white,” which is a prerequisite for being accepted and loved in a racist society. This widely-acknowledged but not-officially-publicized truth made Korean students understand what W. E. B. Du Bois means as he writes in *The Souls of Black*

Folk, “he [the American Negro] simply wishes to make it possible for man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face” (11).

In its exposure of “the powerful mythology of ‘whiteness’” (Singh “Possibilities” 226), *The Bluest Eye* represents the way the Euro-American dominant culture establishes the norm of truth and beauty by its own biological, social, and political standards, and how black people are systematically alienated and excluded from the white discourse. The damaging internalization of cultural assumptions of inferiority stemming from white supremacist ideology is poignantly and succinctly summed up in the following quote from *The Bluest Eye*:

But their ugliness was unique. . . you looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. The master had said, “You are ugly people.” They had looked about themselves and saw nothing to contradict the statement; saw, in fact, support for it leaning at them from every billboard, every movie, every glance. “Yes,” they had said. “You are right.” And they took the ugliness in their hands, threw it as a mantle over them, and went about the world with it. (39)

In her novel, Morrison develops her characters in a way that bears directly on the creation and destruction of black stereotypes. In the foreground, a situation is presented absent of context, prompting the reader to make assumptions that form the basis of prejudice. For example, the narrator briefly mentions in the introduction of *The Bluest Eye*, “We thought, at the time, that it was because Pecola was having her father’s baby that marigolds did not grow” (5). Although at this point in the narrative, we know little about the situation, some readers may judge Pecola’s father as the stereotypical black male abuser. However, as the novel progresses, by revealing Cholly’s personal background full of abandonment, displacement, and victimization, Morrison gradually tries to convert the reader’s prejudice into understanding. In Cholly’s case,

she describes a defining encounter in which white hunters turn Cholly's first youthful experience of love into a degrading farce of sexual entertainment in which he displaces his anger and hatred from the armed white men to the black girl he was with: "He hated the one who had created the situation, the one who bore witness to his failure, his impotence. The one whom he had not been able to protect, to spare, to cover from the round moon glow of the flashlight" (151). As an adult, Cholly's abusive nature may then be understood as "a violence born of total helplessness." When Morrison revisits Pecola's rape through Cholly's eyes, the reader can see that his actions are guided by feelings twisted with love and hatred. By victimizing his daughter, Cholly transfers the victimization that was heaped on him because of his black skin in a racist American society. Pecola's helplessness as a child in the hands of an adult replicates Cholly's own helplessness as a black man at the mercy of white men.

One of the most difficult tasks in teaching African American literature to Korean students is how to deal with the violent and destructive images of the black male and the problematic relationship between black males and females represented in much of African American women's writings.⁵ At the undergraduate level, students studying American literature usually encounter African American writers in survey courses through short excerpts in an anthology. Encouragingly, recently revised editions of American literary anthologies are beginning to incorporate minority writers in greater depth; however, without contextualization in a full text, these excerpts do little to challenge or dismantle widely-held stereotypical images of African Americans. In my experience, some short stories provide effective supplementary means without overwhelming the students with literary bulk.

For example, Ann Petry's "Like a Winding Sheet" adds range to the students' understanding of Cholly's abusive and violent relationships with his wife and daughter. The story succinctly describes the process by which the accumulated stress of living in a racist society causes a decent, loving black male to become a violent wife abuser. It also helps the students understand the plight of black females who have suffered from the double burden of racism from white oppressive society and sexism within the black com-

munity, which is represented in this passage from *The Bluest Eye* summarizing the historical and societal situations of the black female under slavery and Jim Crow:

Everybody in the world was in a position to give them orders. White women said, "Do this." White children said, "Give me that." White men said, "Come here." Black men said, "Lay down." . . . When white men beat their men, they cleaned up the blood and went home to receive abuse from the victim. They beat their children with one hand and stole for them with the other. (138)

Pecola serves as a microcosm for the larger historical picture of a nation that used Blacks as scapegoats for their problems, and Morrison establishes the need not to judge without context.

The same technique of character development that is applied to Cholly is applied to other adult characters in the novel. A stereotype initially lies over a character's personality like a skin which is slowly peeled away through the revelation of each character's unique social history. Morrison notes in the 1994 afterword to the novel that in literature the "foregrounding of trivial information and backgrounding of shocking knowledge. . . gives the reader pause" (213). In the study of African American literature, it is history that provides the "shocking" economic, psychological, and political background, and without this knowledge the texts do not give the reader "pause."

The students' responses to my short questionnaire about their knowledge of African American history showed that Korean students know about slavery, the Civil War, and Emancipation, but they have no knowledge of the whole century of legal segregation and institutionalized racism between Emancipation and the Civil Rights movement. To present a voice unfiltered through the medium of Korean textbooks, I invited Professor Reginald Kearny, an African American history professor from the University of Maryland in Seoul to enlighten my students on Jim Crow segregation and the Civil Rights movement. However, even more effective than a few lectures were the lynching images from *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* by James Allen, et al., and photographs of Emmett Till's murder trial from Juan Williams's *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-*

1965, the companion volume to the PBS television series. Visuals are immeasurably valuable in helping Korean students understand what is difficult to explain in words. The students may have heard about lynching, but they are ignorant of its historical and political background as practiced in the American South in order to put the African American “in his place.” The real horror of lynching comes from the fact that it became, as Walter White put it, “an almost integral part of national folkways” (qtd. in Harris 7): *Without Sanctuary* shows the “announcement” of the lynching as a ritualized event, the “gathering” of thousands of people, including women and children bringing food and drink in a festive mood, and the “postcards” using the horrible pictures of the burnt and mutilated victims. Korean students were more shocked when they juxtaposed these graphic images with the American democratic ideals of Thomas Jefferson’s “Declaration of Independence” that they had studied at the beginning of the American literature survey.

William Faulkner’s “Dry September,” a supplemental short story, expresses in words the horror of the riveting images of lynching in *Without Sanctuary*. It describes the lynching of an innocent young black man after a white woman accuses him of sexual assault. The characters lynch the helpless victim in a mood bordering upon hysteria. Neither the lynchers nor the victim know exactly what happened, and in this ritualized exorcism of Blackness, the actual rape is not the issue: “Did it really happen?” ... “Happen? What the hell difference does it make? Are you going to let the black sons get away with it until one really does it?” (258). The message is clear, as Trudier Harris points out:

White superiority must be maintained even when no crime has been committed; black male sexuality must be destroyed; and black people must realize thoroughly their helplessness and powerlessness. The black children envision their fate in terms of possible victimization, just as the white children earlier envision theirs in terms of power.

(11)

What is most revealing for Korean students in Emmett Till’s case in *Eyes on the Prize* is the fact that the terror and the psychological damage to blacks caused by lynching continued into the

twentieth century, even well into the 1950s. Emmett Till, a northern black boy who was visiting the south for a summer, was murdered in 1955 because he had allegedly said to a white woman, “Bye Baby.” The violently absurd racism that caused the death of this young boy helped students who naively believed that racism in America ended with Emancipation to gain insight into the socio-economic and psychological realities of American racism. It was almost unbelievable how efficiently these shocking visual representations of lynching and the civil rights struggles brought home to Korean students the history that Cornel West characterized as “two hundred and forty four years of slavery and nearly a century of institutionalized terrorism in the form of segregation, lynchings, and second-class citizenship in America” (123). They also helped the students understand “the psychic scars and personal wounds” it left, even long after the dehumanizing endeavor of racism in America formally and legally ended (West 122-23), as epitomized in the representations of Cholly and Pecola in *The Bluest Eye*. The students were also alerted to the fact that the objective of stereotypes, as Hazel Carby suggests, is “not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations” (22).

***The Bluest Eye* in an American Ethnic Literature Course**

In conjunction with *The Bluest Eye*, I chose *Clay Wall*, a novel by Ron Young Kim, a Korean American woman writer, since the world of Asian Americans as reflected in the text introduces another location featuring yet other minority cultures. Bound together by their cultural “otherness,” both Morrison and Kim explore the conflict of societal values which become complicated by the psycho-political dominance of one culture over the other. In power relations defined by race, the people of the marginalized group have no true self-consciousness, and like African Americans, most Asian Americans share a Du Boisian “double consciousness”: as a young daughter of early Korean immigrants in America, Faye internalizes a self-denying sense of “nobodyness” and is torn between the identity of being “Korean” and “American.” Her mother, Haesu, who came to America as an expatriate during the Japanese

colonization of Korea, suffers from the conflict between dualities, “one in the colonial homeland and the other in the postcolonial promised land,” which typically illustrates “the inevitability of multiple identities for people of color” (Singh and Schmidt 21). Faye’s inner conflict becomes more complicated when her mother’s cultural pride in her homeland clashes with their degrading American economic reality and social status, as is exemplified when her mother does not allow her to have a job even though she needs money. She thinks her daughter should be “special,” insisting that “You are not like other American girls. If you try to be like them, you will be nothing special.”

Being “special” takes an ironic twist when Faye later recalls:

[My mother] was right about one thing: I wasn’t like other American girls. No one at school spoke to me or behaved toward me as if I were any American girl. Most of them were nice enough. I even considered Ruth Johnson one of my best friends until she told me, “You know, Faye, I don’t think of you as Korean anymore,” as if there was something wrong with being Korean. (231)

It is surprising to find often similar experiences in African American writings. For example, Karen Russell, the daughter of basketball great Bill Russell, writes in “Growing Up with Privilege and Prejudice” in the *New York Times Magazine*, about a white friend who said to her: “You know, Karen, I don’t understand what all the fuss is about. You’re one of my good friends, and I never think of you as black” (qtd. in Collins 79). How are Faye and Karen supposed to react to these seemingly “well-meaning, liberal white friends” who do not realize that these remarks which are intended to compliment them actually insult them? To be accepted by the dominant culture, both Faye and Karen are discouraged from showing their “Koreanness” or “Blackness.” This supports bell hooks’ observation that “a culture of domination demands of all its citizens self-negation, and the more marginalized, the more intense the demand” (19).

“What is an American?” The question, which Crèvecoeur raised in his essay of the same title in 1782, seems to be still pertinent in current multi-cultural debates. In an Anglocentric America, an American means white, and whiteness is central as the unmarked

standard or norm against which all so-called minorities are measured. Ralph Ellison wryly notes how the black presence contributed toward white American identity in his essay, “What America Would be Like Without Blacks”:

Since the beginning of the nation, white Americans have suffered from a deep inner uncertainty as to who they really are. One of the ways that has been used to simplify the answer has been to seize upon the presence of black Americans and use them as a marker, a symbol of limits, a metaphor for the “outsider.” Many whites could look at the social position of blacks and feel that color formed an easy and reliable gauge for determining to what extent one was or was not American. Perhaps that is why one of the first epithets that many European immigrants learned when they got off the boat was the term “nigger”—it made them feel instantly American. (582-83)

In US society where race and color define the degree of “Americanness,” the visible difference of both Blacks and Asians has been used as a “marker” and a “signifier” to effectively exclude them from meaningful participation in the political, economic, and social life of the nation. Succumbing to the dominant white gaze that directs the marginalized to conform, they value their own bodies as the “inferior other” branded with permanent “inferiority,” and “foreignness.” As an example of the complete assimilation to white values, Pauline and Geraldine in *The Bluest Eye* hate everything black, including their own children, and Pauline, Pecola’s mother, even internalizes the psyche of the historical stereotype of “Black Mammy” from slavery, neglecting her own children in favor of the white family.

How perceptions based on race complicate the lives of Asian Americans is often represented in the typical questions they, some of whom have lived in America for several generations, encounter in their daily lives, such as “Where are you from? . . . Where did you learn your English?” This testifies that even in present American society the gauge of measuring the degree of “Americanness” is still “the white European look.” The only changes may lie in the different ways of showing or telling racism. Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, a leading Asian American critic and writer, describes in her mem-

oir, *Among the White Moon Faces*, the subtle ways of delivering these messages:

There are many ways in which America tells you you don't belong. . . . A polite people, it is the facial muscles, the shoulder tension, and the silence that give away white Americans' uneasiness with people not like them. The United States, a nation of immigrants, make strangers only of those who are visibly different, including the indigenous people of the continent. (199)

Owing to the Euro-centered master narrative of American history, most Americans, including Asian Americans, do not know that Asian Americans have been in America for over one hundred and fifty years, even before many European immigrant groups. The Asian American history videos and PBS series such as "The Ancestors in the Americas" and "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience" help enlighten Asian Americans and Korean students by rehabilitating a history which has been denied and neglected.

In their "Borders" essay, Singh and Schmidt call for the need for more "intra-ethnic or multi-racial comparisons of Asian Americans, Blacks, Latinos, and Whites in ways that will not treat their cultural histories as if they developed autonomously," with a focus on "what connects such groups as well as what separates them" (7). Studies of American race relations have traditionally focused on how each racial and ethnic group is related to white society and culture, but a new focus on "intra-ethnic" or "intra-racial" studies will contribute to relating and connecting different groups of colored people through understanding their common history of victimization and domination.⁶ In fact, most of the recent Asian immigrants including Koreans do not know, as Elaine Kim notes, that "they were among the many direct beneficiaries of the African American-led Civil Rights Movement, which helped pave the way for the 1965 immigration reforms that made their immigration possible" ("Home" 5). It is unfortunate that some Asian immigrants learn that "one of the quickest ways to demonstrate one's kinship within a white supremacist order is by sharing racist assumptions" (hooks, *Black Looks* 10) like Mr. Yacobowski, a European immigrant storeowner in *The Bluest Eye*, who refuses to "see" Pecola. I believe that this kind of comparative study will help to enlighten

the vast ignorance of some Koreans, both at home and abroad, about African Americans.

Reading about the lives of Koreans in America represented in *Clay Walls* helps Korean students, who are familiar with the exclusion of “others” in their own frame of reference, to see themselves through the white lens. They were surprised when informed that through the lens of Eurocentrism, all colored people historically were classified as “Blacks”: the British in India often referred to Indians as “niggers,” and Japanese were put in the same category as Africans by the Portuguese Jesuit missionaries in Japan: “After all, they are Niggers, and their customs are barbarous” (Pieterse 212). The fact that their own race was one of the discriminated targets of the long history of American anti-miscegenation laws prohibiting marriage between whites and “Negro, mulatto, or Mongolian,”⁷ helped the students to realize the history of deep-rooted racism in US society, as did the history of institutionalized discrimination against Asian Americans, from the Chinese Exclusion Law to the Japanese Internment during World War II, one of the major themes in Asian American writings.

Once Korean students realize that they themselves are seen as the “Others” and regarded as objects of discrimination they redefine their views of white racial supremacy. For example, both *The Bluest Eye* and *Clay Walls* expose the white standard of beauty, but it is not until Korean students see the myth of the white standard reframed within their reference that they realize how deeply ingrained in the norm these standards are. Ann duCille’s “Toy Theory” (8-59) prompts the students to question their own internalized Euro-American standards by discussing those ideals hidden within a seemingly innocuous cultural object, the Barbie doll. They begin to understand how the interlocking system of race, gender, and sexuality converges on the issues of cultural domination and how they have unconsciously consented to objectifying themselves as the “Others.” The problem with the politics of difference lies not in the “difference” per se, but in “the oppositional difference” which requires a hierarchical value judgment, either superior/beautiful, or inferior/ugly, as Patricia Hill Collins asserts: “Blue-eyed, blond, thin white women could not be considered beautiful without the Other” (79). Today, the popularity of dyeing hair and getting plas-

tic surgery to create more Western features indicates the lengths to which some young Koreans will go to attain the white standard of beauty. In a world that is getting smaller every day, the issues of acculturation and assimilation are no longer limited to African Americans, Asian Americans, or any minority groups of people living in North America. They are problems that Koreans and the peoples of other countries must face as well in this global age.

Toward Better Trans-racial and Trans-cultural Understanding

John Maitino and David Peck observe in the introduction to *Teaching American Ethnic Literatures* that “ethnic American writers are helping us to rethink and reposition our literature—its borders, its subjects, its forms” (4). My own experience suggests that Korean students can learn to redefine and reposition themselves and their culture through learning about other cultures represented in American ethnic literature. This also helps them to redefine themselves in a transracial and global context by bridging the gaps among Koreans, Korean Americans, and African Americans. It is a daunting challenge to overcome the prejudice that dominates the Korean view of African Americans. In a culture where there are few black people and ignorance is guarded by deeply rooted prejudice, Korean misperceptions of African Americans are unlikely to change easily, but change can be facilitated, as indicated by the results of the post-reading questionnaire that I gave to my students. The majority of students responded that they felt they had much more sensitivity towards African Americans and a much better understanding of African American history and culture. They also expressed shame about their own racial prejudice towards African Americans.

The modern world and the culture of modernity are typically seen as entirely European and Euro-American in origin, and this view assumes that people outside of the West and people of color within it have played little role in the development of a modern economy, society, or culture, but Ziauddin Sardar notes:

The real power of the West is not located in its economic muscle and technological might. Rather it resides in its power to define. The West

defines what is, for example, freedom, progress and civil behavior; law, tradition and community; reason, mathematics and science; what is real and what it means to be human. (44)

The time for non-Western civilizations to simply accept the definitions supplied by the West is over. Coalitions among colored peoples through the shared understanding of their history and culture will challenge the hegemonic power of the West over global affairs and cultures. In this age of global cultural exchanges, to better understand our own culture and identities we need to understand those of other racial and ethnic groups. Transracial and transcultural understandings between and among the “others” will also suggest potential modes of liberation from Eurocentric and ethnocentric thinking and promote the emergence of global cosmopolitanism.

Notes

1. After Kim wrote the *Newsweek* article, she received hundreds of hate mail letters criticizing her view as “paranoid, absurd, hypocritical, racist, and childish” and herself as a “spoiled, ungrateful whining, bitching, un-American bogus faculty member who should be fired or die when the next California earthquake dumps all of the ‘so-called people of color’ into the Pacific Ocean” (3)
2. The survey was done twice: October 1999 and October 2000. The results show that there were some regional and gender differences among the students, but prejudices against black Americans and Africans were almost identical.
3. This short questionnaire asked about their image and knowledge of African Americans. The associated words are “slavery,” “fear,” “crime,” “dangerous,” “threatening,” and “scary.” They know that there are some race problems in America, but do not know much about them. For history, they wrote terms like “slavery” and “Emancipation,” but very few wrote “Civil Rights movement” or “Dr. King.” Some students mentioned “jazz,” “hip-hop,” and black athletes.
4. I have been teaching various courses in American literature since 1987 at the Catholic University of Korea in Seoul. I included some African American writers in survey courses and American novel courses, but I began to offer a separate course on American ethnic literature in 1998. Currently I am teaching some cross-cultural courses including “African American and Asian American Women Writers” and “Images of Blacks and Asians in American Culture” at the African American Studies Program, Boston University, as a visiting professor.
5. This issue was raised by many of the Asian scholars/teachers who participated in the Fulbright Conference on “Teaching American Literature and Culture in Asian Learning Context” at National Sun Yat-Sen University, Kaohsiung, Taiwan, June 1-4, 2000, and at the “International Conference on Comparative Lit-

erature: Asian Initiatives,” at Soochow University, Taipei, Taiwan, March 24-26, 2001.

6. A newly published book by Aarim-Heriot is an example of such multiracial comparisons. It examines the link between the “Chinese question” and the “Negro problem” in nineteenth-century America and highlights similarities in the ways the Chinese and African American populations were disenfranchised during the mid-1800s. Also see Prashad’s attempt to read South Asian diaspora through African American experience.

7. 1880, Section 69 of California’s Civil Code. See Wu and Song xxv.

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