Brutal Fantasies

Imagining North Korea in the Long Cold War

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Preface

From 2012 to 2014, when I first began thinking about North Korea, there were many stories circulating in the media about how bizarre a place it was. These included tales about a unicorn lair near Pyongyang being discovered by archaeologists, the execution of Jang Song Thaek (uncle of current leader Kim Jong Un) by being fed to a pack of 120 dogs, the existence of a North Korean girl group called Moranbang that included a member who was allegedly Kim Jong Un's mistress, and state-sanctioned haircuts for men and women. These news items were often written in a tone of disbelief or even incredulity and lacked political or historical context; and in this way, they encouraged readers to view North Korea as odd, even humorous. The idea that North Korea could be the target of such casual mockery was almost shocking, given that only a decade earlier it was widely depicted as a dangerous and tyrannical force or what US President George W. Bush called part of the Axis of Evil. These emerging representations of North Korea as comically odd and evil were also quite different from characterizations I had encountered while growing up. At community gatherings, in church sermons, and at extended family events, North Korea was occasionally invoked as an object of loss, sympathy, or even pity through references to starving people, some even relatives, who endured harsh conditions and who needed those of us in North America to send aid and missionary support.

Reflecting on these various depictions and thinking about how they changed during my lifetime, I found it almost impossible not to notice how North Korea was routinely and blatantly Orientalized within the US cultural imagination, albeit in distinct ways, by Korean diasporic and non-Korean diasporic Americans. It also became quite apparent that these characterizations of North Korea as strange, dangerous, melancholic, and pathetic—in short, as Other and, as I will

suggest, as inhuman—bore a strong resemblance to how Asian Americans have long been racialized. Recognizing these similarities between how North Koreans and Asian Americans were racialized was a powerful moment for me, one that has taken years to digest. Such depictions often paint North Korea as a relic from the Cold War era, a time characterized by volatile dictatorships, constant nuclear threats, and antiquated cultural and political practices. These kinds of representations, of course, stand in sharp contrast to those of the United States, which has long proclaimed itself to be a global peacekeeping force. Such imaginings of North Korea as a place of absolute difference—whether found in scholarship or in Western media and culture—presume a measure of objective distance that have made it difficult for me to find a place to insert my own story. But gaining insight into both the structure of knowledge production about North Korea and the affinities between North Korea and Asian America has let me begin to sketch out a different set of racial geographies in which it is possible to consider North Korea in terms of relationality and make space for diasporic positionalities.

I have also realized the personal implications of what began as a project about trying to understand the Orientalized representations that have circulated in Canada and the United States and that structure diasporic relations to North Korea. My maternal grandparents were from North Hamgyong-do province in what is now North Korea; my grandfather's hometown is Chongjin, and my grandmother's is Hoeryong. My mother's older brother and sister were born in the northern part of Korea, and the family migrated southward between the end of 1944 and 1947, when my mother was born in Seoul. In 1971, my mother migrated to Canada, and her parents and siblings eventually followed. This is a history of North Korean relations that I became aware of only late into the writing of this book, and by chance when my cousin's wife mentioned that she could tell that my grandmother was originally from the north because of the way she seasoned her food. After this family visit, I confirmed the story with my mother, who provided details about her parents' hometowns and the differences between their class backgrounds and upbringings. She did not share much else about their migration, however, noting that anyone who would know more details had since passed away. My parents and grandparents had never spoken much about their childhood experiences to my brother and me, and the memories they shared had been limited to those about hardship during and after the war and abbreviated versions of the journeys that eventually brought them to Canada. Until very recently, the possibility that my family history could be traced back to anywhere but South Korea had never entered my mind. I had al-

ways assumed that ours was a straightforward story of postwar migration from South Korea to Canada.

In Canada, my parents owned a corner store in Rexdale, a working-class suburb of Toronto, and I have often thought of myself as having lived a version of Ins Choi's *Kim's Convenience* without realizing how the specter of North Korea has also been present in my own life, or perhaps to be more precise, how I have lived the intertwining of North and South Korea in the shadows of US empire through the pressures I felt growing up, the foods I ate, the tenor of my family's gatherings, the particular ways we experienced everyday happiness and even joy, and the many silences with which we lived. In reflecting upon these untold family histories, I have been struck by how they illustrate the contrast between the complex histories of the Korean diaspora and our selective practices of narrating—within texts such as the ones described above and in everyday stories—our relations to the various regions of Korea. I will never know if these stories of migration were not shared because my grandparents thought they were unimportant or because they felt it was too difficult to remember the people and places no longer accessible. But the truth might also be that they knew I would not be able to fully comprehend the nuances of their stories and decided not to try sharing them.

I offer this story as the kind of "autobiographical example" that Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Y-Dang Troeung, and many others theorize, one that uses "one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them,"[1] and to reflect upon how diasporic subjectivities can disrupt familiar migrant tropes by attempting to inhabit historical elisions. I also share this story not because it is unique, but precisely because so many diasporic Koreans in Canada and the United States have similar, if not precisely identical, ties to what is now North Korea.

Thinking about our varied relations to North Korea and how they are shaped by contemporary racial politics, Cold War legacies, and the current global order constitutes the core of this project. As a book directly concerned with knowledge production about North Korea, *Brutal Fantasies* addresses the relations of power that structure North Korea and North America (primarily the United States but also with points of articulation with Canada and other parts of the US empire) with the intention of better understanding how the long Cold War continues to inform the global order, diasporic relations, and conceptions of the human in an uneven yet remarkably persistent fashion. It also asks what kind of archive twentieth- and twenty-first-century representations of North Korea offer us, both for knowing North Korea and for understanding the structures

of knowledge production that have shaped how the global order is imagined, and how we as readers can position ourselves in relation to these structures. In doing so, my hope is that this book can open up space to engage with the more complex relations and the more nuanced stories that exist between and about North Korea and North America.

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Introduction

CULTURAL FANTASIES OF THE INHUMAN

In his post-9/11 State of the Union address, President Bush gave an impassioned speech updating the American public on the measures that had been taken to liberate women and children from the Taliban government and to protect the world from terrorists trained in Afghanistan camps. Firm, even jubilant at times, about the actions the US would continue to take to further its war on terror, President Bush noted that while the US had dealt with the threat of Afghanistan, there were several other regimes that it had its eye on. Naming North Korea, Iran, and Iraq as part of "an axis of evil" that "pose[d] a grave and growing danger" to global peace, he described North Korea as "a regime arming with missiles and weapons of mass destruction, while starving its citizens."[1] Yet it is worth underscoring that this representation condemning the state as a force of absolute evil within a post-9/11 landscape is only one of many incarnations that North Korea has taken within the Western cultural imagination during the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.[2] As Cold War thrillers such as *The Man-*

churian Candidate (novel 1959; film 1962) illustrate,[3] North Korea's ideologies and its relationships with the major Communist powers China and the former USSR meant that it was viewed as part of the Red Scare in the post–World War II period. Since then, the US media, feature films, documentary films, memoirs, novels, human rights commissions, and human rights testimonies have tended to depict North Korea as dangerous, given its leaders' erratic behavior in making nuclear threats; needy, because of its malnourished population; and melancholic, with countless Korean families remaining separated by the impenetrable demilitarized zone (DMZ). These repetitions convey at once the absolute foreignness and relative inconsequentiality of North Korea for North American publics. These familiar, perhaps even banal, representations reveal much about the unconscious structures of the contemporary global order and the affects that signal racialized alterity.[4] This book attempts to explore why North Korea is known in these terms within North America as it traces the consequences of this knowledge production.

Brutal Fantasies examines everyday representations of North Korea for how they articulate and also contest the assumptions of distance and difference that underpin understandings of the global order by foregrounding questions about perspective, positioning, context, and narrative fashioning. While representations of North Korea reinforce the West's perception that the country is a time capsule from the Cold War era, those same discourses depict Canada and the United States as part of a dynamic and modern landscape. And yet, as I argue in this book, there are ways of reading North Korea that challenge this narrative of modern "EuroAmerica and its 'shadow'" by critiquing its assumptions and effects while also recognizing the other complex relations that exist between North Korea and the United States.[5] By opening with these observations, my intention is to highlight how North Korea gets read as a signifier of a bygone era and to ask what is at stake—intellectually, affectively, and materially—in these representations as they are made part of dominant narratives of the Cold War as well as of the narratives told by the Korean diaspora.

The West, in many ways, is an inadequate shorthand that I use to signal a particular post-1945 formation in which various discourses of capitalist modernity, liberalism, the Cold War, human rights, colonialism, imperialism, and race intersect without always coalescing in a consistent or even harmonious fashion. While these forces are at work in geographies outside the West, they are mobilized most often by Western countries and used, to name just one purpose, to disavow sites such as North Korea as illiberal.[6] Rather than perceiving the unknown dimensions of North Korea as aspects to be recovered and mapped, I argue that the fantasy of an unknowable and illiberal North Korea is integral to

how it functions as part of a discursive formation in the United States and, more broadly, in the Global South. This illiberal differentiation is tied to a practice of viewing North Korea through a Cold War analytic even as we, in the Global North, understand ourselves to be in a post–Cold War era. Moreover, as I will demonstrate, these fantasies are part of a larger constellation of Cold War affects that racialize diasporic Asians in the United States. Fantasy production, as Neferti Tadiar demonstrates through her study of the neocolonial relations between the Philippines and the United States, "names a socio-symbolic logic or dreamwork obtain[ed] in the organization of the international community and the scene of its exchanges (the affairs of the world market and international relations)," structured by universal ideals such as security and global civil society.[7] Fantasies of North Korea operate in a similar fashion to affirm the hegemonic desires of the current global order or, as Leslie Bow defines fantasy, as "a screen for projecting cultural and political desires."[8] By defining the appropriate purveyors of freedom and violence for the rest of the world, these fantasies of North Korea generate a sense of global intimacy for those seeking to qualify the human through liberal understandings of agency.

Central to this project is the concept of the inhuman that I take up in two primary ways (and return to later in this introduction to provide more critical context). In the first, North Korea is an inhuman figure that is bizarre, cruel, and melancholic, thereby marking the limits of the human as imagined in a postwar world—the human idealized in terms of dignity, freedom, sociability, culture or political life[9]—and embodying qualities, values, and behaviors that are antithetical to those of the universal human. But North Korea is also constructed as an inhuman figure in a second sense as it functions as techne, or what Pheng Cheah in his study of globalization, the human, and the inhuman defines as "a technical attitude toward other human beings [that] reduces them to objects for instrumental use."[10] In this other sense, the inhuman is reduced to its function or purpose, acting "as a means rather than as an end in itself."[11] Thus we might think of North Korea as a kind of stock figure that sits in the background of many Cold War and post–Cold War narratives, inhuman in terms of how it is both crafted as a figure and instrumentalized in these narratives. Used to emplot, to borrow Hayden White's term, a dominant narrative of the Cold War, the figure of North Korea plays a crucial role in the transformation of "what would otherwise remain only a chronologically ordered series of events with the formal coherency of the kind of plot structures met with in narrative fiction."[12] Often functioning as a device to further plot or reinforce narrative structures, North Korea adds urgency to stories of humanity but is rarely ever taken up as the main subject of them.

In these narratives, whether they take the form of internet memes about Kim Jong Un or news items about the devastating conditions defectors have fled, the threat of nuclear weapons or, more recently, the launching of air balloons with bags of waste attached over South Korea,[13] North Korea is portrayed as a figure that is variously comic and tragic. Pertinent here are the classical definitions of comedy and tragedy that continue to shape Western storytelling. Aristotle's observations about these genres are useful guides as he notes that comedy takes as its focus men who are "worse than the average" and those who are "ridiculous" and that tragedy is a form that makes us feel both pity and fear in order to then experience catharsis.[14] These deep-seated ideas about comedy and tragedy are crucial for understanding how North Korea is imagined today and also for understanding the kinds of responses they elicit in Western audiences, both for their affective dimensions and for the actions they in turn generate. Given that, as White points out, there is no inherent reason for plotting any sequence of events as tragedy or as comedy since stories are told or written but not found,[15] I ask how these global stories come to take the shape they do. At the same time, I recognize that North Korea does not often sit at the forefront of the United States' imagination and, given its positioning, functions more as a minor tragedy or comedy for the American public. Because there is less pressure to resolve the tensions it poses, North Korea can trigger feelings similar to Sianne Ngai's ugly feelings, ones that are "explicitly *a*moral and *non*cathartic, offering no satisfactions of virtue, however oblique, nor any therapeutic or purifying release."[16] Since literary and cultural forms influence "how the social order and its subjects are imagined, articulated, and effected,"[17] North Korea's abjectness works to reinforce the normativity of Western subjects and values, thereby justifying and even helping to prolong a post–Cold War global order.

These familiar Cold War narratives tend to eclipse other stories that can be told about this period, including a complex network of histories and narratives of the Cold War that Heonik Kwon calls decompositional histories. Taking Vietnam and South Korea as his case studies, Kwon writes a postcolonial account that intends to "break out of the global abstraction of the cold war and attend to its diverse, contrary historical realities across locales."[18] This version not only draws attention to neglected histories but also revisits long-standing assumptions that shape how the Cold War is known. For instance, we are reminded that while the beginnings of the Cold War are often debated by historians, "there is a strong consensus in contemporary literature that the end of the cold war is a fait accompli, a universal historical reality."[19] But while 1989 may have signaled the end of the Cold War for those who understood it primarily as an ideological conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union, in

places that experienced active fighting and lived the Cold War "both as a politically bifurcating and radicalizing social order and as a geopolitical order,"[20] not all aspects of it are over. Following Kwon and many new Cold War studies scholars who examine the multiple temporalities of the Cold War as well as the range of structures, relations, and events it produced, I consider how this bifurcated structure continues to affect human rights and diaspora via the figure of North Korea, even as the twenty-first century has set aside the paradigm of the Cold War in favor of neoliberalism and globalization.

At the heart of this project is a belief that representations of North Korea are deeply entangled with the racial logics that construct Asia as a distant region and Asians in the United States as foreign others. *Brutal Fantasies* argues that as objects of knowledge for the United States, North Korea and diasporic Asians are constructed within scholarly and popular imaginations through shared logics whose terms of emergence and circulation are tied to histories of imperialist expansion that reached new heights through Cold War racializing projects. As Christina Klein notes, US postwar expansion generated a discourse of racial tolerance and inclusion that served as its official ideology.[21] But these changes to US immigration policies took place during the late 1960s and early 1970s as the US continued to engage in proxy wars in Asia and Africa. Rather than signaling a change in how Asian migrants were viewed within and outside of the United States, "national inclusion was premised on the very notion that their lives were expendable in order to safeguard the freedoms promised by the nation-state."[22] Klein and other scholars such as Nikhil Pal Singh and Heonik Kwon note that this rhetoric of racial inclusion was tied to a commitment to quash communism rather than to a genuine desire to promote equality. As Singh historicizes US multiculturalism within the contexts of American imperialism and the culture wars since the 1940s, he argues that "anti-communism was the modus operandi for a political project in which a racial animus and an imperial ambition remained paramount."[23] Thus the color line that W. E. B. Du Bois called the problem of the twentieth century was actually a doubled line as it "turned out to be as much about the color of human belief and thought as about the physical color of the human body."[24]

In the case of Korean migrants who relocated to the United States, or to an allied country such as Canada, during the post–Korean War era, many would have believed that the price of racial inclusion was an embrace of capitalist and democratic ideals and a public distancing of oneself from communism and, by extension, from North Korea. Stories such as those told by Eun-Joung Lee in the Legacies of Korean War online archive about how she had not known about her father's blacklisting from the South Korean university system (which was

one of the reasons for her parents' migration to the United States) draw attention to the censuring of North Korea–related discussions, even within familial spaces.[25] The effects of this epistemological structure on the relations between North Korea, North Korean migrants, and Korean diasporas can be seen in the limited place of North Korea within diasporic stories. The structures of the Cold War shaped migrant lives in the United States and beyond by rendering uncomfortable, and perhaps even taboo, topics such as Korean politics during the Cold War, or the friends and kin who remained in North Korea.[26] Exceptions existed, as shown in Jason Lee's short documentary film, *Letters from Pyongyang*, which focuses on Korean Canadians and others in diasporic Korean communities who got in touch with overseas committees in hopes of finding out what happened to their loved ones in North Korea.[27] As a result of his efforts, Lee and his father were eventually granted permission to visit North Korea and meet with their remaining relatives. But the casting of North Korea as a minor villain in Cold War narratives has impacted how the Korean diaspora narrates North Korea more often as an imagined entity than as part of a common set of histories or experiences. As a notable lacuna within diasporic memory, North Korea is frequently configured as a distant site of loss, sympathy, or curiosity for younger generations who know of it mostly as the focus of humanitarian efforts or of religious missions undertaken by Korean and non-Korean church groups that try to save North Korea from itself.[28]

Valuable insights can be gleaned if we approach North Korea in terms of what Lisa Yoneyama calls "transwar connectivity," a phrase she coins to describe "the *ability* to make connections, to perceive affinities and convergences of geohistorical elements that have worked together to constitute mid-twentieth-century violence."[29] Critiquing the tendency of the Japanese public to read Okinawa's experiences under the expansion of the Japanese colonial empire during the nineteenth-century and the US military presence in the twenty-first century as discrete rather than as intertwined histories—in other words, neglecting their transwar connectivity—Yoneyama's *Cold War Ruins* asks how remembering their connections "might generate an unlearning that critically unsettles the way we believe we know our history."[30] Yoneyama is one of a number of scholars who trace what we might call the long Cold War in terms of repressed knowledges, along with others, such as Oswaldo de Rivero, who contributes insight into how the rhetoric of development that permeated twentieth-century discussions of emerging nation-states masked the inherent unviability of the majority of these economies. Thomas Borstelmann attends to the intertwining of US civil rights and global decolonization movements with their respective traditions of white supremacy. Sunny Xiang reads Cold War documents and literature through

tone in order to explore the Cold War not only for its "new structures of governmentality, but also [as] an imperial poetics that operationalized diminution and occlusion."[31] And Randall Williams identifies the continuities between the pre– and post–World War II eras, noting that rather than rectifying violence, human rights is "the privileged epistemic form for political violence."[32] This body of scholarship illuminates the constancy of a global order rooted in colonialism, imperialism, and racial capitalism whose terms and mechanisms for domination have been shifting throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The figuration of North Korea as inhuman offers another opportunity to consider what is at stake in the "epistemic repression"[33] of the connections between multiple systems of violence, domination, colonialism, and imperialism. North Korea as a prompt asks what might be discerned if we read the Cold War and post–Cold War eras together and as constituting a long Cold War, a formation rooted in earlier colonialisms and imperialisms whose effects are, to borrow, Xiang's words, "often quotidian and still ongoing."[34]

I read diaspora's relationship to North Korea as an instance of racial affect in which difference is constructed relationally and naturalized through feeling. In *The Melancholy of Race*, Anne Anlin Cheng directs attention to how racialization operates on a psychic level in order to ensure that scholars attend not only to the social and legal dimensions of race but also to "the more immaterial, unquantifiable repository of public and private grief that has gone into the making of the so-called minority subject and that sustains the notion of 'one nation.'"[35] Racial melancholia offers a means of understanding how the "loss" of North Korea is intertwined with—and perhaps to a degree even structures—diasporic subjectivity through a complex dynamic of rejection, attachment, and internalization.[36] But racial melancholia is not the only affect through which North Korea is constructed in terms of racial difference, neither by diasporans nor by non-diasporans. If, following Alexander Weheliye, we define "race not as a biological or cultural classification but as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full human, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans,"[37] we can see how other reactions such as shock, disgust, and confusion also reinforce a sense of distance and difference from North Korea.

To conceptualize diasporic Asians and North Korea, then, as part of the same racial formation is also to reflect upon how we encounter these representations and how they circulate as comparable forms of anti-Asian racist sentiment that exceed geographical regions. At stake in refusing to accept North Korea as an uncomplicated signifier of inhuman Asianness is a commitment to understanding how North Korea ties together the longer histories of the dehumanization of Asians in US settler colonial projects with the disposability of Asian life

during the hot wars of the Cold War period. In other words, North Korea offers a means of reading the racialization of Asians in settler colonialism and the Cold War through each other. Thus, another way of complicating Cold War analytics is to attend to the particular intertwining of race and ideology as well as to understanding North Korea in relation to local knowledges and national histories other than just EuroAmerica's. Imagining Asian America or Korean diasporas in relation to North Korea requires acknowledging complex, often even conflicting, personal and intellectual connections to unexpected sites and communities. But the payoff of understanding North Korea in terms of intimacies and unruliness is that it yields new ways of understanding the Cold War and post–Cold War eras and their racializing projects.

Messy Objects, New Methodologies

Brutal Fantasies comes out of thinking that is informed by conversations taking place in Asian American studies, Asian Canadian studies, Global Asias, Inter-Asia cultural studies, and Asian diaspora studies. While these are overlapping spaces in which many of the same scholars and texts circulate, their different structures and geographies illuminate the messiness of Cold War logics in novel ways. Read together, these various approaches to Asias and Asian diasporas prompt a reckoning with colonialisms, imperialisms, Cold Wars, and globalizations as multiple and simultaneous, thus countering tendencies to conceptualize history in the singular, linear, and homogeneous terms inherited from area studies. I offer this book as a contribution to these conversations as it intends to name moments that frustrate, or even refuse, area studies framings and universal paradigms of the human in order to pivot toward different conversations about North Korea. Intending to recognize the minor inhuman as a figure that is not simply strange but also at times strangely familiar, I focus on North Korea as an assemblage of geopolitical speculations that seem to be about place and people but that in fact say more about the power dynamics embedded in who gets to read and frame North Korea itself.

This project asks how North Korea can be conceptualized outside of the militarized frameworks of academic area studies while sharing the critical energies of Global South projects. In posing this question, *Brutal Fantasies* engages in conversation with scholars who address Cold War illegibilities. For example, Lisa Yoneyama, Jodi Kim, Laura Kang, and Y-Dang Troeung engage, respectively, with transwar justice and redress culture, with the entanglement of US imperialism and Cold War logics in Asia, with Asian women as a prompt for reconfiguring post–Cold War forms of victimization and violence, and with

the erasure of Cambodian refugee lifeworlds.[38] This body of scholarship reasserts the need to think about how the Cold War disrupted the lives of people situated in Asia and other non-Western countries, and how it continues to reverberate in those spaces and for their diasporas.

Inspired by these various intellectual and regional approaches to Asias and Asian diasporas as well as by postcolonial, queer, materialist, and Black studies theorists to understand North Korea and diasporic Asians in the United States through concepts of the human and the intimate, my intention is to think relationally rather than comparatively. This is a departure from much of the critical and popular discourse that frames North Korea as a security problem by focusing on nuclear weapons and the need for disarmament. To approach North Korea in terms set by area studies is to imagine it as an unknowable entity in order to manage it, thereby disciplining North Korea in both senses of the word. The colonial dimensions of the post–World War II US disciplinary formations of area studies were intended "to train young men and some women in the necessary language, so they'd be able to interrogate the enemy and to secure the necessary data to carry on a successful war. In other words, it was directed toward winning the war and defeating the enemy."[39] The Cold War project of controlling regions required a militaristic weaponization of knowledge, especially language acquisition and cultural "mastery," to infiltrate the local community from a position of power.

And while the end of the Cold War led to "a new raison d'être for area studies, namely the new needs of the contemporary US empire,"[40] the binary structure it established between the West and the Rest continues to shape knowledge production far beyond the confines of area studies. Tadiar offers a sharp critique of this separation as it emerges in the practice of Western critics who write about gender, race, and sexuality by universalizing Western understandings of difference:

> You know your theoretical acts are local, even as you are aware of the global, but still you cannot seem to retain the fact that this is the place where the brackets are made and placed, the areas conceived and implemented, the global defined (for those areas to demonstrate, resist, or elaborate), which sets the stage for all those other indeterminate "differences" not encapsulated by the ones you know so well to persist in some inchoate form that you are likely to call "cultural."[41]

Shu-mei Shih also writes about the persistence of divides as they shape Western critical thought. She notes that even as area studies has undergone certain transformations (as evidenced by its less combative relationship to disciplines and as

shaped by the United States' newer and more diffusive need for information), it still acts as a resource for US empire by "continu[ing] to repress the racial logic of the empire vis-à-vis racialized populations out there in the areas as well as its internal racial minorities within the metropole."[42] She turns to "the affective economy of area studies" to map the complicated relations that area studies experts have to their objects of study (and their tendency either to marry their objects or to be hostile toward them) in order to explain Asian studies' tense relations to Asian American studies.[43] As Tadiar's and Shih's observations make painfully clear, current iterations of area studies not only continue to diminish non-white and non-Western bodies and forms of knowledge by centering the West but also influence how non–area studies scholars conceptualize difference more broadly.

This book interrupts this practice of disciplining subjects through difference and distinction by recognizing the messiness of North Korea as an object produced in the post–World War II period. While area studies approaches assume that North Korea constitutes a geopolitical problem that can be solved by knowing and mastering it, I suggest that the impossibility of fully knowing North Korea makes it a moving, but stabilizing, signifier for the global order. North Korea is an object that justifies the actions that national governments and international organizations take toward it by functioning in much the same way that Edward Said described the Orient as operating for Orientalists: "At most, the 'real' Orient provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it."[44] The structures that produce Orientalism and North Korea as objects of knowledge for Orientalists and area studies experts are designed to maintain the distance between the expert and his object and to ensure that "the Orientalist" remains "outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact."[45] Such a formulation imagines the Orient and North Korea as discrete and passive entities, relying on experts to interpret them and bestow meaning, rather than as unruly and knowing subjects. But if we expand our gaze as we look toward North Korea to also include the authoritative manner in which Western experts claim North Korea, we can see that this attitude reveals much about the post–Cold War order. Here I am inspired by Kadji Amin's critique of queer studies for how it always reduces its subjects to either good or bad ones as it imagines alternative social worlds. The problem with idealization is that it "tends to be ahistorical, since history, in the Foucauldian sense, is nothing if not the strategic mobility of shifting relational networks within which no one entity can occupy the position of resistance for very long."[46] And while it may be true that subjects can be idealized and resistant only for a finite length of time, the example of North Korea suggests that bad objects can endure indefinitely.

While North Korea is an object of intense scrutiny for area studies, it is comparatively understudied within Asian American studies. With the exception of Christine Hong's voluminous scholarship on North Korea, Korean American studies has tended to engage primarily with South Korea. This is not to say that North Korea has been excluded altogether from the field of Asian American studies; scholars such as Jodi Kim, Daniel Kim, and Crystal Baik include North Korea as part of their book-length studies, and Eleana Kim's *Making Peace with Nature* turns our attention to the discourses of peace, militarism, and ecology as they shape how we know the DMZ.[47] Rather, it is to say that North Korea is not the main focus of Asian American scholarship. Much of the critical energies of Korean American studies are directed toward critiquing the structures of imperialism, militarization, migration, and citizenship that produce the conditions of racialized life for Korean subjects in the United States, often mapping the migrations from South Korea that were produced by the Korean War. North Korea, embedded within socialist worlds and functioning as a figure of illiberalism, is an object less directly useful for critiques of capitalism and liberalism. But what it offers are other ways of understanding Korean diasporas and US imperialism by reframing concepts of resistance, agency, and diaspora. North Korea puts pressure on Asian American studies to decenter the United States as it engages with narratives that neither begin nor end (always) in America in order to produce more expansive conceptions of politics and transnationality.

Mapping the discursive field within which North Korea is located requires negotiations with how it is positioned on the edges of Asian American studies and human rights scholarship, how it is claimed by area studies, and how it looms in the background of critical Cold War studies. As anthropologist Sonia Ryang notes, North Korea is an object that resists conventional methodologies and that requires unorthodox ones.[48] But at the same time, forging a different approach is not a straightforward matter. As a literary and cultural studies scholar situated in Canada, it has been a challenge for me to hold onto my diaspora-centered questions about North Korea while navigating the deep bodies of scholarship that tend to take up North Korea, diaspora, the Cold War, and cultural studies through very different methodologies and objects. My own questions come out of seeing North Korea in what Bruce Cumings calls *parallax* terms. He uses this concept to describe how changing American perceptions of East Asia do not necessarily "represent the reality of shifting power relations" but instead "seem to mark shifting points along a line of observation."[49] Similarly, reading from the vantage point offered by diaspora makes it possible to discern the relations of power that determine prevailing opinions of North Korea and how various disciplines, experts, institutions, and systems of

power construct North Korea as an object of knowledge and the material and symbolic effects that these constructions have produced for those in the diaspora, human rights scholars and activists, North Korean migrants, and North Korea as a nation. By taking cultural representations of North Korea as my entry point, I attempt to shift conversations that have fixated on the geopolitical dimensions of North Korea as well as those that center South Korea within investigations into cultural production and diaspora. My intention is to think about why North Korea as an ideation is needed as a geopolitical touchstone and about how North Korea can also act as a very different kind of reference point for those who need it differently.

Toward a Genealogy of the Minor Inhuman

To understand North Korea as a cultural fantasy of the inhuman that accrues meaning as it circulates throughout the United States and sites shaped by US imperialism, I engage with North Korea as a place, a government, and a people, but also as the thing that gets returned to repeatedly, with performative force, as these representations inform how North Korea gets lived. And in this way, I interrupt what Saidiya Hartman in another context refers to as "the violence of abstraction."[50] Akin to Alexander Weheliye's reading of blackness as "the conglomerate effect of different racializing assemblages,"[51] I read the overlapping assemblages that make up North Korea as a cultural fantasy rooted in the multiple logics and historical formations that give rise to how the figure of Asia is imagined as inhuman, a category distinct from, but nonetheless still related to, the subhuman that has often been used to racialize Black and Indigenous subjects.

Reading with Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and other Black studies scholars, Weheliye examines the human as a disciplining and racializing category by asking how the deeply sedimented logics of race demand "the barring of nonwhite subjects from the category of the human as it is performed in the modern west."[52] Excluded from the human ("as the postcolonial variant of Fanon's category of les damnés") in order to accommodate the overrepresentation of the Western bourgeoisie, racialized and Indigenous subjects are organized into various subgenres of the human.[53] Race is the principle used to subordinate and exclude certain subjects,[54] with Black and Indigenous peoples functioning "as the physical referent of the projected irrational/subrational Human Other to its civic-humanist, rational self-conception. . . . All other modes of being human would instead have to be seen not as the alternative modes of being human that they are 'out there,' but adaptively, as the lack of the West's ontologically absolute self-description."[55] By mapping European colonialism from the medieval period

to settler colonialism in North America, Wynter makes visible the precise ways in which Black and Indigenous subjects are conceptualized as subhuman while acknowledging the "marked differential in the degrees of subrationality, and of not-quite-humanness, to which each group was to be relegated within the classificatory logic of the West's ethnocultural field."[56]

I want to hold onto Wynter's point that the not-quite-human is a capacious category marked by various classificatory systems in order to ask what version of the not-quite-human North Korea enacts for the West. Just as the different forms of the *subrational* or *subhuman* that racialize Black and Indigenous subjects cannot be understood as equivalent to each other, the *inhuman* offers yet another distinct form of racialization with its own set of cultural logics, racial affects, and geopolitical specificities. Tracing how the Asian has come to be imagined as inhuman requires that we expand our geographies to include sites and powers that lie outside of the circuits of European colonialism and therefore need to be historicized differently. By rerouting our inquiry through North Korea, we produce another genealogy of those excluded from the human; more specifically, engaging with North Korea as a genre of the inhuman reveals how race and racialization are articulated through Cold War ideologies and how the particular forms that these relations take—through, for example, representations of North Korea as an anachronistic nation, North Koreans as starved and dehumanized masses, and North Korean leaders as resembling cult leaders—can be investigated as Asian forms of racialization that exceed North Korea's borders.

Much is revealed if these dynamics of inhumanness embodied by North Korea and North Koreans—as figures to be pitied, feared, or mocked—are positioned in relation to the kinds of techno-Orientalist representations that Jane Park describes in terms of "oriental style"; that Leslie Bow describes as "racist love"; and that David Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta Niu describe in the context of Asian American studies. For Park, Oriental style is a means of reading the representation of East Asia in Hollywood films in order to understand "the domesticated other we think we know, the other we admire and love and occasionally accept as one of our own; the other we do not realize that we fear and perhaps hate."[57] The central preoccupation for Park is to understand how Orientalism is transformed from yellow peril to yellow future as the Asiatic is associated with twenty-first-century technology and circulates transnationally.[58] Bow takes up these ambiguous feelings by directing our attention to objects such as a cute anthropomorphic cartoon that "operates as a form of visual hate speech, a racial microaggression—that is also somewhat adorable."[59] This critique of racial abstraction helps us understand the split feeling that structures racist love,

one "in which attraction masks anxiety."[60] Thus for Bow, techno-Orientalism should be read for how "it also engages a specific affective structure; techno-Orientalism is tech feeling as anti-Asian bias."[61] Roh, Huang, and Niu's collection on techno-Orientalism adds to these interrogations by approaching them from the perspective of Asian American studies. In their introduction, they ask whether "techno-Orientalism [is] still Orientalist if contemporary techno-discourse is being authored principally by Asians, seemingly without regard for the Westerners who look on with a mixture of anxiety and envy?"[62] While much of techno-Orientalism comes out of post-Fordist anxieties about shifting global power and the outsourcing of work to Asia, this diagnosis by Asian American studies often leaves out North Korea. While South Korea offers a site that is useful for analyses of techno-Orientalist fantasy, North Korea remains a problem for this discourse.

Bow's notion of the "*suggestively* human" is a useful analytic for grasping how North Korea becomes a particular genre of the inhuman that is imagined to be unfeeling, trivial, and inconsequential while also being configured as threatening.[63] But the suggestively human in North Korea's case operates somewhat differently from the techno-Orientalist futures that Park, Bow, Roh, Huang, and Niu sketch out, given North Korea's associations with dated rather than with cutting-edge forms of technology. The persistent association of North Korea with nuclear missiles, for example, underscores its Cold War framings, thus making it menacing and inhuman but nonetheless cast in terms of near obsolescence. Unlike the techno-Orientalist imaginaries that configure the Asian in terms of a threatening future, North Korea is a machine-like figure associated with bygone dangers that continue to haunt us.

To take seriously the performative dimensions of North Korea is to ask how and why it becomes for the West a figure of the minor inhuman upon a stage of nations. North Korea is often viewed as embodying a form of inhuman strangeness or cruelty, one that is ever present in the background, like a minor form of white noise that never fully occupies our attention. To describe this form of the inhuman as minor is not to suggest it is insignificant "but rather to indicate the complex relations of power at work" and to ask, as Park does of oriental style, "what kind of cultural work it does in and at the margins."[64] Moreover, to think of "the minor as a method" draws into focus "the epistemological assumptions and ontological conditions that uphold the order of things, the major," and it illuminates the structures that produce the figure of the inhuman as a counterpoint to the political-juridical category of the human that gains prominence in a post–World War II era with the ascendancy of human rights discourses and through the formation of the United Nations with its attendant documents

such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR; 1948), the Refugee Convention (1951), and the Refugee Protocol (1967).[65] Within such discourses, the human is figured in universal terms, and the paradigm of liberal human rights is "an antipolitical 'moral discourse' [that] has functioned to evacuate historical and geopolitical contexts, and indeed to imply the obscenity of explanatory frames other than the most immediate."[66] Christine Hong argues that this refusal to contextualize human rights has produced a deep forgetting that "wipes the slate of colonialism clean, adopting a conveniently presentist perspective."[67] To counter this amnesia, we would be wise to heed Randall Williams's call to "shift our analytical perspective from one that assumes that imperialism is a problem *for* international law, to one that grasps their mutually constitutive relationship."[68] Conceptualizing human rights as independent from economic and social rights or from social and historical contexts limits what it can achieve; this limitation can be seen in the driving vision of the UDHR, which outlined a new mode of citizenship that welfare states would then provide, but which overlooked the fact that most of the global population lived under empires rather than in welfare states.[69] By refusing to take the material conditions in which people live into account, human rights discourses abandon equality as a goal. Thus, as Samuel Moyn argues, human rights have "become our language for indicating that it is enough, at least to start, for our solidarity with our fellow human beings to remain weak and cheap."[70] In other words, human rights discourses, by design, idealize the neoliberal subject and exclude all others from consideration. By promoting a liberal moralism that eschews the need for historical framing, human rights discourses continuously produce North Korea as a figure of the minor inhuman. Chapter 2 of this book, by turning to human rights testimonies and North Korean memoirs, examines how human rights discourses shape perceptions of North Korea.

There are many examples that can be drawn from Korean history that make it clear that Koreans were not imagined as the subjects of human rights. For instance, the imposition of an Allied trusteeship on Korea at the end of World War II framed the country as a minor, incapable of self-governance. And, as historian Monica Kim astutely observes, the stakes of the nonrecognition of Korea become apparent if we locate it within the series of anti-colonial movements that took place in the post-1945 era in order to ask how they changed the terms of warfare: "Whether India, Indochina, or Algeria, the demands for sovereign recognition shook the very foundation of Western colonial power and thus its global reach: its prerogative to deny recognition, whether in terms of humanity or the waging of violence. War, we must remember, was a privilege accorded only to recognized states."[71] Here, I would add Hong's observation that "the

various human rights vernaculars—anti-colonial, race radical, communitarian, Third World"—that emerged during the Cold War with the intention of making a more inclusive and representative humanism have largely been sidelined within international human rights paradigms.[72] By investigating the ways in which North Korea becomes imagined as a minor inhuman figure rather than as a subject of history, I seek to understand the global order in a post–Cold War era in terms of racial affect, particularly how it manifests in its discourses of Cold War justice, the utopian aspirations of national and global projects, and humanitarian interventions.

Contextualizing the "Hermit Kingdom"

Since many detailed accounts and sophisticated analyses of the division of Korea at the end of the Pacific War and the subsequent Korean War already exist,[73] I limit my retelling of these events to a brief outline. The dominant historical narrative of North Korea and South Korea as it circulates in the West focuses on the Korean War (1950–53), the armistice, and the establishment of the DMZ.[74] What is typically noted in overviews of Korean history are the territorial aspects of the occupations and conflicts, perhaps because they most easily telegraph the lasting impacts of the war. More specifically, much attention is paid to the division of Korea along the 38th parallel at the end of World War II, when Japan surrendered and the United States and the USSR were given the temporary responsibility of governing the South and the North, respectively, until Korea achieved independence. In effect, this meant that while the country was officially freed from Japanese colonialism at the end of World War II, it was immediately reoccupied by US and Soviet forces. Monica Kim critiques the oddness of the United States' claim to having bestowed freedom on Korea through military occupation by asking, "How did one 'occupy' a former colony of a wartime 'enemy' who had surrendered unconditionally?"[75] This situation of occupied liberation continued as the Republic of Korea (ROK) and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) were founded in 1948 (but only the ROK was recognized by the UN, as the DPRK had not participated in the United Nations' [UN's] supervised democratic elections). Two years later, the two nations were at war with each other, and while the physical fighting came to a halt with the signing of the armistice agreement in 1953, the two sides continue to remain at war, their conflicts merely taking on other forms and occurring in other arenas.[76] In her investigation into prisoners of war (POWs), interrogation rooms, and the Korean War, Monica Kim notes "the locus of war in the 'new' postwar era was the interior worlds of individual people," and the

pressing question for nations was: "Who would fashion the new human subject for the world after 1945?"[77]

For the purposes of contextualizing my discussion of how North Korea is produced as a cultural fantasy of the inhuman, I highlight a few pertinent details about how Korean histories have been constructed from complex and often unwieldy cultural memories of Korea.[78] The Korean War is often referred to as the forgotten war, and as many critics remind us,[79] it is unlike the heavily televised Vietnam War, which remains a major event in US history. Instead, the Korean War, the first of the proxy wars in Asia, represented an innovation in the sense that it was the first time that the United States used the UN to execute its military campaign. Ryang, Kwon, and other scholars draw attention to factors such as the Western media, international bodies like the UN, and Cold War politics in order to help us comprehend the specific reasons that the Korean War tends to be forgotten. These elements and circumstances are also relevant for understanding forgetting in relation to Korea more broadly, and for examining the kinds of ahistorical readings that tend to be performed of North Korea.

One of the challenges of contextualizing North Korea is that we are acutely aware of how partial our knowledge of it is, and this limited knowledge has become part of a deeply sedimented narrative of North Korea in the West as well as an implicit justification for the creative license often taken with representations of North Korea. This framing is visible in how the history of North Korea since 1948 has been reduced to what Daniel Kim might call a "potted history,"[80] characterized primarily through the reign of three brutal generations of Kims (Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong-il, and Kim Jong Un); the devastating famine of the 1990s; and the perception of North Korean citizens as inhuman beings incapable of thought, feeling, or resistance. Absent from such skeletal overviews are the complex regional dynamics from the past century that would enable more nuanced understandings of the relationship between the North Korean government and its people and that would guide us in imagining North Korea differently. For instance, the ability of the Kim dynasty to remain in power during and after the famine offers one such necessary window. As Hazel Smith explains, the rest of the world expected that dramatic political changes would take place after the Arduous March, as the famine and economic crisis of the 1990s were referred to within the country. However, this did not occur because the dire economic circumstances and repressive political environment made the idea of political protest unappealing and almost impossible. In the context of North Korea, "regime change activity was risky and much less likely to achieve transformation of daily life compared to the marginal improvements that could be gained by engaging in 'grey market' activity."[81] And, while North Koreans may not have worked to

overthrow the government, they became increasingly disillusioned with their government whose struggles against US imperialism and adherence to a philosophy of *juche* were far removed from their own desires to overcome their daily struggles with poverty. That North Koreans may be acting pragmatically with the goal of survival is not a narrative that circulates as easily as the one in which the DPRK continues to exert absolute control over a nation of automaton-like citizens who are as incapable of questioning Kim Jong Un as they had been of questioning his father, the Dear Leader, or grandfather, the Great Leader.

Other details of North Korean history serve to counter the presentist understanding of North Korea as incomprehensible and its leaders' decisions as arbitrary and irrational. Using a longer historical lens that extends beyond World War II not only reminds us that Korea has been subjected to the dominance of Japan, China, and the United States for centuries but also reveals how their imperial legacies continue to shape North and South Korea. For instance, despite the formal conclusion of Japanese colonialism at the end of the Pacific War, vestiges were visible for decades afterward in the social conservatism of South Korea.[82] While the post–World War II US occupation supported the Korean Democratic Party (KDP) because it most closely approximated a liberal democratic position, this move overlooked the fact that the KDP was neither representative of the South Korean population nor was there even a basis for liberal politics within South Korea. Under Japanese rule, Korean society had been composed of peasants and a wealthy landowning class and this structure continued to shape South Korean society after World War II.[83] In contrast, North Korea during this period was motivated by an anti-colonial nationalism that attempted to institute major social reforms with respect to gender and class. While the idealism of gender equity and the introduction of laws that addressed divorce and property rights among other things were unable to fully rectify gender inequality in the post–World War II period, they opened the door for future social changes in North Korea. For example, by the 1990s, women had become the main breadwinners in their households, and this position of economic power helped transform the gendered division of labor and other disparities.[84] Assessing North Korea during this period, Cumings argues that in 1946, North Korea was a place where "those who staffed and benefited from it believed it to be a vast improvement over the previous system; [and] those who suffered from it thought it to be a draconian network that denied all freedom to the individual. Both were probably right."[85]

Nevertheless, inspired by this egalitarian vision, many people left the difficult conditions in Japan and even South Korea following the Korean War to go to North Korea and become part of this new society. But families who remained in

South Korea often faced negative long-term consequences when their close relations crossed into North Korea with the hopes of becoming part of its new socialist vision. Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem's documentary film *Memory of Forgotten War* illustrates this through the stories of people who experienced social and employment barriers because of their familial ties to North Korea and who, as a consequence, migrated to the United States. Through the stories of four Koreans whose families were torn apart by the war, we are given insight into the deep convictions of those who believed in North Korea's anti-colonial projects and supported its utopic aspirations. At the same time, we also learn about the costs borne by relatives who remained in South Korea. The film draws our attention to the political repercussions for those whose relatives had chosen to head North, as they were unable to advance professionally—like Lee Min Yong, who was denied tenure as a lecturer; or Chun Sun Tae, who was unable to become a diplomat[86]—and also to the immense emotional pain of never being able to speak about these losses, not even to close friends.[87] Lee Min Yong recounts how his two brothers and sister who went to North Korea were erased from their family history through a rewriting of the family register; but these excisions proved to be futile as the government still seemed to know about their existence. The four stories recounted in the film illustrate how politically conservative mechanisms such as South Korea's National Security Law have "maintained the hegemony of anti-Communism in South Korea. Its indiscriminate application to suppress dissent of any kind could render any person a *ppalgaengi* (빨갱이) or a Commie."[88] *Memory of Forgotten War* also contradicts multiculturalism's core belief that migrants move because they desire a better life as individuals speak about how they were pushed to emigrate to the United States as a consequence of the barriers imposed by the South Korean government. While the anti-imperial beliefs that drew Lee Min Yong's siblings to North Korea are often oversimplified by the West as North Korean hostility toward the United States—a point reinforced through anecdotes about school children being taught to see America as the enemy—such a framing requires recontextualizing to also include the anti-colonialism directed toward Japan that marked the emergence of the DPRK and that prompted earlier waves of migration from Korea.[89] As Crystal Mun-hye Baik argues, Lee Min Yong himself undermines such approaches through his "framing of the Korean War *beyond* the binary of good and evil as an attempt to speak against and outside of Cold War historical writing."[90] To complicate US-centric understandings of diaspora, chapter 3 of this book positions North Korea in relation to the Korean migrations that occurred before and after 1948.

At the same time, it is worth noting that North Korea was not always, and in many respects is still not, an isolated hermit kingdom. Since its inception,

North Korea has balanced complex economic and political ties to Russia and China while negotiating often-difficult relations to the United States, Japan, and South Korea. North Korea's less well-known global connections include the exchanges of students, labor, and even orphans with socialist countries such as East Germany, Romania, Poland, Hungary, and Russia during the Cold War.[91] The North Korean children's summer camp, Songdowon International Camp, has been in existence since 1960, and hosts children from countries such as Vietnam, Ireland, and Tanzania.[92] Also, what is often neglected is that North Korea was a prosperous regime until the mid-1980s (boasting a stronger economy than South Korea's until then); it offered economic and political assistance to other Global South countries, including Guyana, Cuba, Algeria, Syria, and Cambodia; and it even functioned as a site of refuge for individuals fleeing the Cultural Revolution in China during the 1960s.[93] As historian Moe Taylor's research on the relationship between North Korea and Guyana reveals, Guyanese prime minister and then-president Linden Burnham's concept of cooperative socialism was heavily influenced by North Korea.[94] During this time, North Korea was a shining socialist model for many newly liberated Global South countries. Closer to home, North Korea was also a source of ideological inspiration for many of the Black Panthers, most notably Eldridge Cleaver, who traveled to North Korea and wrote the foreword to *Juche!*, the collected speeches of Kim Il Sung, which Cleaver praises for outlining "new ideas about the world we live in and the possibilities of human ascendency to brilliant heights of achievement and peace."[95] Cleaver argues that there are valuable lessons to be learned by the American public from North Korean struggles, including how to internationalize a struggle that unites oppressed peoples across the globe.[96] And more recently, in the early 2000s, a few human rights organizations were allowed to enter North Korea.[97] Turning to these forgotten aspects of North Korean history, particularly to North Korea's relations to other nonaligned nations, helps to map the complex networks within which North Korea is situated and to remind us that it was once a more prosperous and influential country.

Intimate Archives

North Korea is the embodiment of twentieth- and twenty-first-century global anxieties about race, nation-states, and world systems. As Bruce Cumings notes when he summarizes the representations of North Korea in the US media in the 1990s, "North Korea ended up thrice-cursed, a Rorschach inkblot eliciting anticommunist, Orientalist, and rogue-state imagery."[98] While North Korea is widely assumed to be an enigmatic and impenetrable space, many scholars have

argued otherwise, noting that while it is difficult to gather information about North Korea, such a task is not impossible. Researchers have access to UN testimonies by North Korean refugees, North Korean refugee memoirs, US intelligence reports, and archival materials about North Korea held by enemies and allies alike. As Monica Kim's study of the interrogation of prisoners of war during the Korean War shows, much can be gleaned about North Korea by turning to archives and collecting oral histories from outside of North Korea. North Korea is, moreover, not an illogical and unfathomable nation-state but rather "an understandable place, an anti-colonial and anti-imperial state growing out of a half century of Japanese imperialism and another half century of continuous confrontation with a hegemonic United States and a more powerful South Korea."[99] To build upon this reading of North Korea as understandable, this book engages with cultural texts by Korean diasporic authors or produced through collaborations between North Korean and US writers. Through these alternate writings, I trace a genealogy of the many intimacies between North Korea and the US.

Brutal Fantasies critiques those global ways of knowing North Korea that work to normalize a post–Cold War order, and perhaps even to make it aspirational, by turning to filmic, literary, and media depictions of North Korea. Drawing on a different corpus of materials than is conventionally used by area studies, I examine the epistemological structures that construct North Korea as an imagined object for Americans in order to begin to understand the very real effects these representations have produced for North Korea, North Koreans, and Koreans in the diaspora. For this reason, I ground this analysis in an archive of materials largely written in or translated into English and that centers, but is not only limited to, the United States.

Beginning with an examination of fiction and film by non–Korean American and non–Korean British filmmakers and writers for style and genre, I analyze how North Korea is produced as a site of brutality. I then engage with novels and films produced by Korean American and Korean Canadian writers, living both in North America and in South Korea, and memoirs written collaboratively by North Korean migrants and US writers, to frame the memories, histories, and narratives told by North Koreans and diasporic Koreans as a legitimate body of knowledge about North Korea and, moreover, as what Stuart Hall calls a living archive. To read creative texts by diasporic and migrant Koreans as part of a dynamic archive "contradicts this fantasy of completeness. As work is produced, one is, as it were, contributing to and extending the limits of that to which one is contributing."[100] At the same time, these archives provide opportunities to rethink what we believe we know.

Such an approach to archives and knowledge telegraphs clearly that this project neither presumes the kind of objective distance from its objects that area studies demands nor attempts to exert what Gavin Walker and Naoki Sakai call "remote control."[101] By moving away from an approach to North Korea that presumes that what is needed is a true account to set the record straight, *Brutal Fantasies* joins in conversation with other scholars whose work is visibly informed by their deep personal investments. As Vinh Nguyen reminds us as he reflects upon the experience of finding a photograph of his mother in an archive, "Writing that does not eschew the embodied self but makes it a guiding compass becomes a critical mode of living and survival."[102] If we approach North Korea through our relations to it, rather than our distance from it, we can more easily interrogate the designs and desires that shape scholarly knowledge about North Korea, Asia, and Asians.

The Bizarre, the Inhuman Masses, and the Melancholic

By drawing on North Korean defectors' life writing, media representations, films, and fiction produced in the last twenty years, *Brutal Fantasies* analyzes how Cold War and earlier colonial histories continue to exist as illegible but nonetheless powerful affective legacies. The chapters of this book thus examine the affective economy (composed largely of disbelief, fear, and sadness) present in various articulations of this cultural fantasy of North Korea in order to provide ways of conceptualizing North Korea that counter a Cold War frame.

In chapter 1, I consider how the figure of the minor inhuman is written into the US cultural imagination through the genre of what I call dystopic speculation. Through an analysis of Adam Johnson's bestselling and critically acclaimed novel *The Orphan Master's Son* and the Hollywood feature film *The Interview*, I demonstrate how representations of North Korea draw on familiar tropes centered around the bizarre, the strange, and the inhuman qualities of North Korea. As part of this analysis, I consider how American publics turn to works of fiction in order to speculate about North Korea, given the characterization of the country as an otherwise incomprehensible, nonsensical, and hermetic space. However, it is this very speculation about North Korea and appetite for morbid sensationalism that in turn produces, rather than reflects, North Korea's perpetual unknowability within the global imaginary. I consider how representations of North Korea are underwritten by broader Cold War scripts about freedoms and rights as defined by the Global North, and how the generic signifiers of North Korea reinforce Western ideals. The latter part of the chapter complicates these representations of North Korea by positioning North Korea

in relation to South Korea and Japan, two US client states. I turn to an analysis of the British film *The Lovers and the Despot* for how it depicts North Korea's kidnapping of South Korean director Shin Sang-ok and actress Choi Eun-hee. Like the other stories examined in this chapter, *The Lovers and the Despot* also writes North Korea as a villainous Cold War figure even as it expands the geographies in which these figurations play out.

Chapter 2 analyzes how North Korea becomes a fantasy of the minor inhuman as it is instrumentalized for the purposes of human rights discourse but never the subject of human rights. I hold onto the questions of positioning and genre examined in chapter 1 as I critique both how human rights discourse is deployed toward North Korea and the demands placed on North Korean subjects to make themselves legible to global humanitarian publics. This chapter tracks how these events collectively spurred new attention toward North Korean defectors and deepened a market for sensationalist life writing, testimony, and biographies relating to North Korea. Then I consider—by way of an analysis of Blaine Harden's *Escape from Camp 14* (based on the biography of Shin Dong-hyuk)—how these works sensationalize North Korean figures based on their very inhumanness, representing the limits to a human rights–based frame. The chapter concludes by turning to a documentary film, *Camp 14: Total Control Zone*, which lets Shin Dong-hyuk explore additional aspects of his story and, moreover, tell his story in terms that do not fit tidily into the frame of human rights.

Chapter 3 begins unfolding the problem of North Korea as a fantasy of the minor inhuman by examining it within the context of Korean diasporas. My intention here is to begin to unravel what North Korea means to the Korean diaspora, both as an affective touchstone and as a structuring principle. At the same time, I also question how the Korean diaspora is typically narrated in terms of the transits between South Korea and the United States, and read through the intertwined frames of the Korean War, US imperialism, and American migration policy. While unquestionably important, this focus obscures more complex social and familial histories that connect many Korean diasporans to North Korea as well as the relations between a US-centered diaspora and a larger network of Korean migrations that prefigure the Korean War. Through a reading of Krys Lee's *How I Became a North Korean*, I consider how privileging certain circuits, discourses of ethnonationalism, and histories of migration produces subjects legible as part of the Korean diaspora and as national citizens as it renders others minor, inhuman, and vulnerable. I argue that the structures that produce legibility are the same ones that transform North Korea from neighbor or kin into distant, disavowed, and exploitable object. This chapter also models a reading

of North Korea in terms of intimate connection in order to ask how the Korean diaspora can begin to understand itself in more complex, varied, and networked terms than current Cold War narratives allow.

The book concludes with an epilogue in which I resituate North Korea within a socialist landscape. Drawing primarily on two independent South Korean documentary films, *The Children Gone to Poland* and *Kim Il Sung's Children*, that depict North Korean orphans who were sent to Eastern Europe in the 1950s, I begin to explore the new directions that are made possible when North Korea is no longer reduced to an inhuman figure that is the antithesis of liberalism and US imperialism.

Notes

PREFACE

1. Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams," 5; see also Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*; Sharpe, *In the Wake*; Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*.

INTRODUCTION

1. George W. Bush, "President Delivers State of the Union Address," January 29, 2002, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129–11.html.

2. Bruce Cumings provides context for President Bush's grouping together of these countries as an axis of evil by noting that "Osama Bin Laden and friends" disrupted "the Cold War doctrine of containment [that] was still in place" formally and informally in much of the world (Cumings, *North Korea*, 96). He critiques the logic behind President Bush's decision to categorize "a group of nations that could easily be contained and deterred, namely, Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, with the diabolical and uncontrollable Al Qaeda. Thus emerged the 'axis of evil.' These evil-doers were not suicidal and had return addresses, but no matter: they might give or sell their weapons to terrorists" (96).

3. See J. Kim, *Ends of Empire*, for an extended analysis of North Korea and *The Manchurian Candidate*.

4. Many other scholars have also noted the tendency to fashion North Korea in inhuman terms. Historian Suzy Kim's study of the North Korean everyday opens with a description of a satellite image of North Korea that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld interpreted as an illustration of North Korean tragedy. Kim notes, however, that this is "not an image that speaks for itself, as Rumsfeld would have us believe" but is instead a composite of images that have been carefully crafted together (Suzy Kim, *Everyday Life*, 1). Similarly, International Relations scholar Hazel Smith begins her book on economic change in North Korea by challenging the widely held belief that North Korea is "mad, bad, and sad," arguing instead that North Korea is, like many other countries, undergoing the transformation from socialism to capitalism (H. Smith, *North Korea*, 1). Immanuel

Kim's study of North Korean comedy films also starts by observing a global tendency to belittle North Koreans, this time as the target of jokes told in China, shared via US-made YouTube videos, and performed on South Korean comedy shows (I. Kim, *Laughing North Koreans*).

5. Harootunian, "Shadowing History," 192.

6. In Daniel Vukovich's analysis, illiberalism is a means by which China scholars and media experts frame China's difference from Western norms. He notes that illiberalism is often used by Western nations to critique the intolerance of authoritarian governments and to advocate for the core tenets of liberalism that include individualism, normative universalism, and free markets (Vukovich, *Illiberal China*, 7). While mapping a genealogy of liberalism, Vukovich points out, by way of Raymond Williams's keywords, that in the sixteenth century, *liberal* was a term that referred to class, not to political ideology. This layer of meaning in which illiberalism signifies "vulgarity, ignobility, intolerance, and—still—servility" is crucial to understanding the affective threat that illiberal figures such as North Korea and China pose for the liberal world and, moreover, how "illiberalism can then index not just ugly people and classes but ugly, unfree, non-liberal regimes and nations" (21). But it is worth noting that even for Vukovich, North Korea remains a limit point for how far illiberalism can be stretched as he argues for an understanding of China as a legitimate economic regime rather than dismissing it as "North Korea Lite" (229).

7. Tadiar, *Fantasy Production*, 29, 31.

8. Bow, *Racist Love*, 18.

9. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 3.

10. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 4.

11. Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions*, 4.

12. White, *Figural Realism*, 8.

13. "North Korea Sends."

14. Aristotle, *Poetics*, chap. 5.

15. White, *Figural Realism*, 9.

16. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 6.

17. Slaughter, *Human Rights, Inc.*, 11.

18. H. Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 58.

19. H. Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 1.

20. H. Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 34.

21. Klein, *Cold War Orientalism*, 11.

22. Man, "Anti-Asian Violence," 28.

23. Singh, "Culture/Wars," 510.

24. H. Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 37–38.

25. See "Eun-Joung Lee—Video Excerpt," Legacies of the Korean War, 2015, https://legaciesofthekoreanwar.org/story/eun-joung-lee/.

26. As Namhee Lee observes, the discourse of anticommunism, fear of North Korea, and anxiety about being labelled a Communist was not restricted to South Korea: "The reunification movement in South Korea and among Korean diasporic communities was also particularly hard hit by the division between those who were rumored to have ties

with North Korea—and were therefore 'impure'—and those without such ties. The overseas Korean communities, particularly foreign students' communities in the United States and the former West Germany, were extremely cautious about any unintended link with North Korea" (N. Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 107).

27. Jason Lee, *Letters from Pyongyang*, 12:47.

28. Ju Hui Judy Han provides valuable historical insight into one set of relations between South Korean Protestant churches and anti–North Korean sentiments by tracing the migration of middle-class Christians from the northern part of Korea after the land reforms of 1946: "Newly dispossessed and displaced, Christian landowners from the North fled to the South in large numbers, carrying with them intense bitterness and personal animosity against North Korea and Communism" (Han, "Shifting Geographies," 200). This is not to say that all South Korean Christians are as conservative as these anti–North Korean and anticommunist Protestants as there are also more progressive Christians in South Korea (201). As Ingu Hwang notes, Christian organizations such as the World Council of Churches played a crucial role in developing pro-democracy and human rights campaigns in South Korea (Hwang, *Human Rights*, 34).

29. Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, 49.

30. Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, 49.

31. Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence*, 3.

32. Williams, *Divided World*, xx.

33. Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*, 49.

34. Xiang, *Tonal Intelligence*, 3.

35. Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, 6.

36. Cheng, *Melancholy of Race*, xi.

37. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 4.

38. See Yoneyama, *Cold War Ruins*; J. Kim, *Ends of Empire*; Kang, *Traffic*; and Troeung, *Refugee Lifeworlds*.

39. Harootunian and Sakai, "Japan Studies," 596–97.

40. Shih, "Racializing Area Studies," 35.

41. Tadiar, "Ground Zero," 173.

42. Shih, "Racializing Area Studies," 36.

43. Shih, "Racializing Area Studies," 37.

44. Said, *Orientalism*, 22.

45. Said, *Orientalism*, 21.

46. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*, 8.

47. See J. Kim, *Ends of Empire*; Daniel Kim, *Intimacies of Conflict*; Baik, *Reencounters*.

48. Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 3–4.

49. Cumings, *Parallax Visions*, 1.

50. Saunders, "Fugitive Dreams."

51. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 20.

52. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 3.

53. Wynter, "Unsettling," 261. Elsewhere, Wynter further underscores the effects of this hierarchy of the human and subhuman in her response to the police brutality experienced by Rodney King and the ensuing civil and criminal trials, arguing that the no hu-

mans involved (NHI) category often used by the Los Angeles judicial system to refer to young Black men is a direct outcome of this logic (Wynter, "No Humans Involved," 42).

54. Wynter, "Unsettling," 264.

55. Wynter, "Unsettling," 282.

56. Wynter, "Unsettling," 301.

57. Jane Park, *Yellow Future*, 25.

58. Jane Park, *Yellow Future*, 5, 24.

59. Bow, *Racist Love*, 4.

60. Bow, *Racist Love*, 7.

61. Bow, *Racist Love*, 111.

62. Roh, Huang, and Niu, *Techno-Orientalism*, 15.

63. Bow, *Racist Love*, 12.

64. C. Kim, *Minor Intimacies*, 8; Jane Park, *Yellow Future*, 1.

65. Yapp, *Minor China*, 5.

66. Hong, "Reframing," 514–15.

67. Hong, "Reframing," 515.

68. Williams, *Divided World*, xx.

69. Moyn, *Not Enough*, 7.

70. Moyn, *Not Enough*, 6.

71. Monica Kim, *Interrogation Rooms*, 4.

72. Hong, "Reframing," 513.

73. For more thorough accounts of the Korean War, see Monica Kim, *Interrogation Rooms*; Cumings, *North Korea*; Cumings, *Korea's Place*; Cumings, *Parallax Visions*; H. Smith, *North Korea*; and Lankov, *Real North Korea.*

74. In South Korea, a different set of struggles exists over how to narrate the war. Jae-Jung Suh sketches out the war as "a site of contestation where different epistemological projects clash" (J. Suh, "Truth and Reconciliation," 504). The hegemonic narrative writes the Korean War as "6/25," the officially sanctioned date of when the war began with the North firing the first shot. But other versions of the war exist and approach it as a war that began before the Korean division in 1945, as a war in which the South Korean state committed acts of violence against civilians before 6/25 and long after, and as an international war with disproportionate US intervention (504). Suh also observes that efforts to create an independent and modern nation-state were underway before and after 1945, but these were contested given the uneven effects of colonialism. Thus "the Korean War could break out only when the discrepant post-colonialities were straight-jacketed into two antagonistic nation-state building projects that were at once hegemonic in aspirations and constrained in capacities" (505). See also United Nations Command, *Armistice Agreement*.

75. Monica Kim, *Interrogation Rooms*, 45.

76. For example, the annual Ulchi Freedom Guardian exercise involves ROK and US troops and demonstrates their readiness for battle. According to the US Department of Defense, the "exercises also highlight the longstanding military partnership, commitment, and enduring friendship between the two nations, help to ensure peace and security on the peninsula, and reaffirm US commitment to the Alliance" (US Department of

Defense, "Exercise Ulchi," August 18, 2017, https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/1282786/exercise-ulchi-freedom-guardian-2017/). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the DPRK tends to interpret these military exercises as offensive rather than defensive in nature and responds by testing its own weapons; see Choe and Ramzy, "South Korea and U.S. Begin Drills." A lower stakes illustration of the warring relationship between South and North Korea is the blaring of K-pop, propaganda music, and speeches at each other across the DMZ. The broadcasts have been condemned by An Myong-hung, North Korea's UN representative, as "psychological warfare" and "in essence an open act of war" (as quoted in Choe, "North and South Korea").

77. Monica Kim, *Interrogation Rooms*, 5.

78. Responsibility for the Korean War has been assigned to various parties and is often contingent upon who is telling the story. According to Heonik Kwon, responsibility for the war depends on when its origins are dated. If one locates the origin of the war in 1950, then the North's attack on the South, backed by China and the USSR, was the instigating event. However, if one traces the origins of the war back earlier, then the South is equally responsible as it provoked border skirmishes and suppressed nationalist forces. And if one links the origin of the Korean War to the end of the Pacific War in 1945, then the United States and the USSR must be held responsible as they partitioned and occupied Korea (H. Kwon, *Other Cold War*, 2).

79. Sonia Ryang and Daniel Kim are two of many critics who make this point; see Ryang, *Reading North Korea*, 6; Daniel Kim, "Bled In," 550.

80. Daniel Kim ("Bled In," 553–57) discusses this term at length. He adopts it from Susan Choi's 1998 novel, *The Foreign Student*.

81. H. Smith, *North Korea*, 2.

82. In Bruce Cumings's words, the aftermath of Japanese colonialism can be seen in how "postwar South Korea, far from being an anti-colonial entity, often contained virtual replicas of Japanese forms in industry, state policies toward the economy, education, police, military affairs, the physiognomy of its cities, and its civic culture (such as it was). Newspapers were identical in form, if not in content, to Japan's; South Korean schools were museums of colonial practice until the early 1980s—down to the black uniforms, pressed collars, and peaked hats that every male student wore" (Cumings, *Parallax Visions*, 77).

83. Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 193–94.

84. Lankov, *Real North Korea*, 29.

85. Cumings, *Korea's Place*, 232.

86. Lee Min Yong and Chun Sun Tae's experiences in South Korea are sadly not unique, since "under the system of punishing family members and relatives of those accused of a major crime such as *lèse-majesté* (*yŏnjwaje*), the family members and relatives of an alleged leftist were barred from employment as public servants, attending military academy, and travel abroad, which prevented them from obtaining jobs in corporations" (N. Lee, *Making of Minjung*, 78).

87. Crystal Baik's examination of the oral histories contained in *Memory of Forgotten War* (Borshay Liem and Liem, dirs.) and in the digital archive Legacies of the Korean War illuminates the process by which Korean migrants displaced by war were remade as

American immigrants. An important point is made through Baik's reading of Eun-Joung Lee's description of her father's silence regarding his wartime experiences, even when speaking to his children. Baik argues that Lee Min Yong's "hesitation to speak and share is not a symptom of forgetting but a mode of fragmented communication that resonates loudly and painfully within the domestic confines of their family" (Baik, *Reencounters*, 59). See also the archive website, Legacies of the Korean War, 2015, https://legaciesofthekoreanwar.org/.

88. E. Kim, *Making Peace*, 35.

89. While North Korea made a concerted effort to decolonize its policies and politics, "in its haste to deny everything Japanese, it created mirror-image institutions, beginning with the emperor-like leader principle, the corporate political system, the leader's ubiquitous *chuch'e* ideology, and the establishment of the leader/emperor's birthday as a national holiday" (Cumings, *Parallax Visions*, 77).

90. Baik, *Reencounters*, 62.

91. Sung-Hyung Cho's documentary *Verliebt, Verlobt, Verloren*, for example, examines the stories of the North Korean men who were studying in East Germany during the 1950s, the German women they married, and their children. In the 1960s, North Korea recalled these students, and they were forced to leave their families behind in Germany. Kim Deog-Young's *Kim Il Sung's Children* traces the migration of North Korean orphans and teachers to Hungary, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia during the Korean War and their return to North Korea in the late 1950s. Like Cho's film, Kim pays close attention to the friends and families with whom these North Koreans had to cut ties.

92. Waxman, "You Can Send Your Child."

93. H. Lee, "Life as a North Korean Refugee."

94. Vicki Kwon's *Mass Games: Nation-Building Spectacles in Postcolonial Guyana and North Korea*, an exhibit of artistic materials produced during cultural exchanges between North Korea and Guyana from 1980 to 1992 also traces the ideological, cultural, and material flows between the countries via the mass games staged in each country.

95. Eldridge Cleaver, foreword to Li, *Juche!*, xii.

96. Eldridge Cleaver, foreword to Li, *Juche!*, ix.

97. B. Suh, "Controversies," 25.

98. Cumings, *Parallax Visions*, 127.

99. Cumings, *Parallax Visions*, 149.

100. Hall, "Constituting an Archive," 91–92.

101. Walker and Sakai, "End of Area," 3.

102. Nguyen, "Mẹ-Search," 469.

CHAPTER 1. DYSTOPIC SPECULATION

See also Christopher P. Hanscom's *Impossible Speech: The Politics of Representation in Contemporary Korean Literature and Film* (New York Columbia University Press, 2024). I regret that I did not have the opportunity to more fully engage his writing as I only discovered this book very late in the publication process of my book.

1. Adam Johnson's imagining of a North Korean spy vessel disguised as a fishing boat