

through Myung Mi Kim's  
Provisional Architectures

Propose: constant translation.

—from “Thirty and Five Books,” *Dura*

Myung Mi Kim has spoken of *Dura* as marking the beginning of a life work, a life concern. It makes sense that this work wouldn't be organized under a single rubric, would locate itself across several books and in various (vastly different) iterations. One has only to open the fold-out sections in her *River Antes*, or attend a reading from *Penury* “for six multilingual voices,” to grasp the extent to which this work travels, locates and relocates itself. I understand this as a domestic concern, in the political sense (as in domestic versus foreign politics). The local context of reading and of a reading is key: it must be sounded out by a “constant translation” off/to everyday conditions. Thus, the “household radix” of *River Antes* might just name the poems therein as a reconfiguration of daily, lived concerns sounded almost a decade earlier in *Dura*:

Strong house  
Stout homestead  
Impair aperture  
Sluice root  
Barrier birth  
Famine finer  
Human density

River condition  
—from “Chart,” *Dura*

The political-domestic in Kim’s poetics is a condition of “inside acts conducted outside” (*Penury*). The articulation of a form—inasmuch as it tends to behave as an act of affiliation—threatens to dislocate & disrupt the effort to have a house in the first place (or a book, or any kind of shelter, any utterance). The work of writing, then, is (among other things) a tactic to cope with a threat—a “candle to withstand cholera” (“Thirty and Five Books,” *Dura*).

While this concern is sounded throughout Kim’s work, her poems have less to do with argument than with rigorously holding articulation aloft. “Constant translation”: to find a home/make a home/make oneself at home in/of/by constant *relocation*—as location. Kim’s practice bears a relation to field poetics, but through Ponge’s notion of “the *pré* as the field of decision.” This means that the work is at best precarious: the poetic field is where “we must track the meanings and residences of our actions” even as it constitutes *itself as one of those actions* (“Generosity as Method”). The poems are local, are in every way protective.

George Oppen, from the daybooks: “If we are able to imagine ourselves outside, we see that it was our home.”

Kim’s “household radix” can be read as in some way responsive to a danger in the nostalgia of Oppen’s backward glance: this “outside” already threatens (to be)

all there is left. Able or not, it doesn't really matter. "Our home" is already inside-out.

It makes sense that this work wouldn't be organized under one rubric or contained in one book or series, because "the book" is in so many ways inextricable from its own material condition as a legitimizing, categorical force. Here, BOOK has its part in "the outside" no imagination of which affords a habitable view. It must be politicized: "Where I can say 'politicize' I have to say that word 'generosity'" ("Generosity as Method"). To open up a space for reading outside of the book (or at least, outside of this tendency of the book), a shelter or a line of flight.

In Kim's work, wordless sounds and the sounds of words (absent of what they signify) are somehow capable of resisting this legitimizing force, partly due to their tendency to do so much work unrelated to meaning-making. As a tactic, the sonic duration of Kim's "candle to withstand cholera" has less to do w/articulating a program for enlightenment or recovery than w/configuring the daily language material in such a way as to shelter a movement of sound—a provisional structure, a momentary enclosure, into and through which an almost purely sonic event can pass.

If thrown off of the house or horse  
—from "Cosmography," *Dura*

Semantically, a house on the move and/or a horse as where you hang your hat. Here, though, meaning is sustained in

the resonance between “house” and “horse” (and “or”) across a duration, where the positioning of letters and sounds does all the work of syntax or signification in shaping that meaning. Kim’s sonic arrangements of word pairs & phrases chart a course, sound against semantic limits, and locate the act of reading as a participatory sound event. Often what meaning there is must be sounded out or performed in order to come to form. This is travel by sonar through false walls. This sound event’s political dimension is explained in Kim’s notion of “generosity,” an insistence that reading/writing can have a radicalizing potential that exceeds the threat of categorical force, even if only provisionally.

In Kim’s work this potential is often realized in poetry’s ability not just to make meaning sonically, but to politicize “making meaning” by making noise of syntax: “Manacle pole / Dispel embrace / Native place” (from “Chart,” *Dura*). This is syntax as an arrangement designed to make *sound* as much as (or even more than) sense.

accumulation of land	maintain household bear	labor of house child
cooking reserve line	belonging to	elaborate isolation
familias implements of	enemies captured in war	bearing child rearing
production heirs number	and rear household	family contains in germ
counting herds possessions	fellow feeling crude	isolate care cherishment
accumulation of land	bearing rearing	family contains in germ
implements of production	cooking reserve line of	the number belonging
counting possessions	heirs	isolation
enemies captured	maintain household bear	isolate care
labor house child	and rear heirs household	fellow feeling crude

—from *River Antes*

Kim's vowel/consonant shapes & syntactic doublings dig tunnels, connect across durations and, severing, resurface elsewhere. As the event of "bearing rearing" ends (the event of the sonic connection made from "bearing" to "rearing"), elsewhere "bearing child rearing" reconstitutes the form in translation, which event is echoed elsewhere in turn ("and rear heirs household"). In musical terms, this might be called something like a refrain, but here, *rebuilding* or *reconstruction* might be as appropriate a description.

In passages like these, Kim illustrates her notion of "form as the interplay of mobile elements, actuated by the ensemble of movements developed w/in it" ("Pollen Fossil Record," *Commons*). This is an architectural relationship to form (syntax/line/field/book), even if the scaffolding is only provisional. That this form is "actuated by the ensemble of movements developed w/in it" means not only that participation is essential for a form to constitute itself, but that the shelter of form is fleeting, in flux. Kim has spoken of poetry's work as tracking just such a "negotiation between the form and its divestment" ("Generosity as Method"). In the political-domestic sphere, solutions are only ever temporary, even though the materials (as "mobile elements") are often reusable.

Since erecting durable architecture seems so much less important in Kim's work than building a structure capable of sheltering a duration or event, a useful architectural figure for this particular node in Kim's poetics would be the sidewalk shed: the temporary scaffolding, often attached to a building under construction, that

permits the free flow of pedestrian traffic and protects passersby from construction debris.

Like durable architecture, the book often (inescapably) seeks a more permanent establishment of inside and outside (what happens in this book, which readers are included in this book's meaning, which meanings are and aren't here, which discourses are outside of this one, which traditions, etc.). Kim's poetry, on the other hand, like the sidewalk shed attached to a more monumental structure, works more like a passageway than a wall/edifice/monument/column/etc. The sidewalk shed protects a practical, daily movement in the face of the construction of more permanent architectures. Like Kim's work, it erects a scaffolding that can/must be "divested," can/must keep us on the move.

In relation to the larger building, the sidewalk shed is noisy—it disrupts the syntax of durable architecture. It hasn't discovered "the outside" of systems (of a building, say), but works instead on the presumption that finding an escape is too long-term a goal to begin with, that passing unharmed is a more pressing concern.

### **SHED ADDENDUM: The false wall/curatorial effort of *River Antes***

The impracticality of publishing the "navigation between form and its divestment"—the difficulty of retaining/containing the radical import of that effort—is certainly palpable. Between the monetary restrictions

and the editorial conventions of book publishing, it takes a special collaboration between writer and publisher to make way for such concerns without erasing them completely.

In the Atticus/Finch edition of *River Antes*, the arrangement of the poem into fold-out panels might be seen as just such an effort to make space in a book, to foreground both visual space & reading that *occurs in a space* (rather than/as well as in a sequence). To make a home for a reading/some readings. Inasmuch as this arrangement necessitates the building of a false wall, the Atticus/Finch edition is very much a curatorial endeavor.

My reading of the fold-outs: I cut the first fold, thinking it was an uncut edge, when I first read the book. My mistaking the book as replicating a kind of readerly nostalgia is only overly literal in its execution; the violence of my first reading is certainly anticipated by the poems and book design. My reading inserted a system where there was meant only to be a horizon, an event, an exhibit, & a home. A political-domestic home—a localized reading. An experience of space & thus a conjugated interaction with “the book.”

The fold-outs of *River Antes* disrupt sequence and quite literally gesture toward the outside of the book. They require that a reader become involved in constructing (the sequence of the poem & the object itself, in unfolding the pages) and tearing the structure down (in closing each fold & moving along).

## **2<sup>nd</sup> SHED ADDENDUM: Classoutsideoutsideclassoutside**

Because so much of her work is concerned w/instruction, containing flashes of the same “reified residue of education” that Adorno finds in Beckett’s work, it should come as no surprise that Kim’s poetics & her pedagogy are outcroppings of a shared concern. As a poet & as a teacher, she has set out to make space for reading—as involving more than one person—and for conversation—as an act of “constant translation.”

In her process seminar at SUNY Buffalo during the Fall of 2005, Kim resisted as much as possible the tendency to try and arrive at some kind of shared vocabulary or empty group shorthand. Rather than encouraging the participants to offer their contributions in a more institutionally sanctioned formulation, she encouraged a kind of untranslated multiplicity in the conversations. This multiplicity itself was, it seemed, tactical:

Often I don’t think it’s a matter of disagreeing with someone’s poetics, or someone’s thinking about poetics/politics, but rather that we all come to this conversation about radicalization at different paces, and if we as writers, workers, readers, could agree to work really, really hard on recognizing where each person is in that trajectory, in that motion towards change or radicalization, then there is a kind of inclusiveness that is necessary for real change.

—“Generosity as Method”

The onus for translation in Kim’s classroom was on the listener, which made for some of the most engaging—at



times impossible—exchanges I've ever participated in. In fact, I'm confronted here by a nearly insurmountable difficulty in trying to offer a response to Myung Mi Kim's work as a poet and teacher. It has to do with exactly that thorniness of making things legible that her poetics and pedagogy explore—the problem of articulating an admiration of her work and a gratitude for her teaching without turning the saying-so into a kind of academic or critical coin. Practicing filial devotion while resisting abstract affiliation.

Discussions in Kim's seminar weren't geared towards arriving at clear and final answers, or rehearsing some trendy theoretical doctrine, but instead sought to politicize the very activity of academic investigation, to radicalize the work at hand by resisting the monolithic erasure of academic discourse. This meant that the class was in every sense a shelter, held in place (for a time, a semester) by a rigorous attention to *making room* for an event, for people in a room.