

Myung Mi Kim is a model writer, one who actively and unapologetically thinks through and with the world in her poetry. Less interested in a turn of phrase or some impossible sublimity, her work seeks out the “live kicking wire” in the form of the project itself. What does it mean to be Korean American? Well, firstly, what is a nation? What is the space, both geographically and in the imaginary, it occupies? Under what banners of values has it been delineated, and how have those values been mobilized? How has this in turn moved bodies across the globe, and towards what ends? Kim’s poetry springs from this sort of heuristic line of inquiry, which I can trace in *Dura*.

“Who even came this way,” begins “Cosmography,” the first of seven parts that make up *Dura*, which I read as an investigation into the relationships between exploration, conquest, trade, displacement, landscape, history, and the human imagination. Significantly, her first words conjure up an absence, one to which she directly addresses herself. Such a gesture is illustrative of a sort of principle that underlines her method: the forces that have displaced and moved bodies across the globe become legible when we track the traces of the lives they touched.

Addressed to no one. Globe and a model
of the planets. Book of perpetual. Book

of boulders. Ascending numbers. After
each enunciation. In the first, what kind
of education. In the second, crested jay
to the front, *wasah, wabasah*, to the left.
Sound as it comes. Alkali. Snag snag sang.
Usher liberty. (18)

This last section from “Cosmography” sounds many of the themes that occupy her oeuvre as a writer—an interest in enunciation and address, the way we mark time, what we know and how we come to know it, and how language intersects with, shapes, and is shaped by these concerns. The first two sentences of this particular excerpt point to the type of knowledge regarding the world that has become the authoritative norm—a “globe and a model of the planets,” for example, is explicitly “addressed to no one,” and draws its power to seemingly represent the solar system accurately from its neutral objectivity. Yet how does this sort of representation of the world fare against the claims of someone like Marco Polo, who Kim cites in her epigraph beginning the next section, “Measure”? “All desirous of knowing the diversities of the races of mankind as well as the diversities of kingdoms, provinces, and regions of all parts of the East, read this book,” Kim quotes from *The Travels of Marco Polo*. But what *Dura* illustrates is how contentious, motivated, enforced, and partial totalizing knowledge actually is. In this light, Kim’s preference for the sentence fragment is less one of willful reticence than it is an indicator of her appreciation for how fraught the act of meaning-making or representation truly is. If Marco Polo’s claims regarding the East turn out to be quite flat

alongside the crunchy fragments and dense observations that *Dura* offers, perhaps we need to reevaluate our own contemporary understanding of the world. What does the globe fail to provide us in its representation? How has it enforced a particular type of imagination?

Dura, and much of Kim's work, argues that a key aspect which totalized knowledge consistently misrepresents or mischaracterizes is our sense of time and our relation to history. Kim's interest in duration, of the present moment and the constantly resonant past, seeks to offer alternative relations to time that refuse or elude the telos-driven logic of progress. The logic of progress prizes ends before means and frequently results in a militarized sense of geography that ignores or subordinates the psychic well-being of its inhabitants. In this light, "progress" becomes a relentless march towards the displacement, disenfranchisement, or destruction of obstacles. My title for this particular piece, "shaped like relation suggested like progress" (93), drawn from "Progress in Learning," is meant to echo this impulse on Kim's part—of re-setting our chrono-acumen (if I may coin a word) to a new type of tempo or measure, one that does not see gains in the straight lines of expansion or conquest, but in the spiraled arcs and returns of relation. We see this in *Dura's* treatment of history—Kim's poems resist strict chronology in their exploration of memory and space. In this manner, we can begin to see how the act of relation is "suggested like progress"—relation becomes a truly *moral* advancement, one that attends to psychic terrains as it traverses geographic spaces.

Kim's poetry also insists that when we consider the work that *value* enacts upon the world, we must also attend to its shape. In many instances, this requires an attentiveness to the aural aspects of language that frequently become subsumed under an imperial devotion to sense or meaning. Sound is thus a significant aspect of Kim's poetry because sound, or noise, frequently evades a clear, unidirectional reading. For instance, the repetitiveness of "snag snag sang" (a repetitiveness that interestingly mirrors the word's literal definition) or the warble of "*wasah, wabasah*" resist our efforts to make them align with the rest of the text in a sensical fashion—they resist contributing by their sonic elusiveness (or obtrusiveness). And yet such movements are not haphazard—"snag" can transform visually into "sang," which can be read as an associative call back to the birdsong a few lines earlier. I read such moments as invitations to the reader to reflect on meaning itself, to examine how the interpretive agents at work in her reading process become activated, and also as a call to consider how there might be some alternative harmony or other notion of logic organizing not just the materials of the poem, but of the world. And lastly, these efforts at highlighting the sonic aspects of the world, and of language, also imply the living agents that produce these sounds. If the sounds appear ghostly, or those who would have voiced them are absent, I contend that Kim's poetry asks us to consider why.

To suggest that Kim's work is simply a heuristic investigation shortchanges the strong critique her poetry lobbies against the appropriative violence of colonial and

commercial interests.

Stamped by purse. Bone soldered. Labor open.

Light and propagation. That stolen. Torment a sum of *pieces prices*.

Bodies in propulsion. Guatemalan, Korean, African-American sixteen year olds working check-out lanes. Hard and noisy enunciation.

A banter English gathers carriers.

What is nearest is destroyed. (73)

In this short piece from “Thirty and Five Books,” Kim includes an image of American commerce—the mixing of various peoples from different shores brought together in the act of buying and selling. This is the new face of the country, as evidenced by the youth of the register workers. But what is it to be American? Is it to be displaced, brought ashore here, for the purposes of trade (“stamped by purse,” with violent undertones)? And at what cost? Perhaps only to unite under an enforced tongue the “banter English” that “gathers carriers.” This movement is not without casualty or harm—“bone soldered” suggests the violence of these sorts of displacements and transformations.

My hope is that this short introduction into some of the major aspects at work in *Dura* provides some vantage point from which new readers can view her work, but I certainly do not mean to close the text nor suggest that these are the only lenses through which we may appreciate

Kim's projects. Each time I reencounter one of her pieces, I am rewarded with new insights, new observations, and a renewed appreciation for the important work that poetry can enact upon the very seat of our being—of how we see, think, and feel. These very properties of her poetry ensure that Myung Mi Kim will be read and will continue to resonate with readers for a long time to come.

On a more personal note, I would like to add that it is work by poets such as Myung Mi Kim that actively challenges and shapes how I see myself in the world. The sheer accident of my birth—of being born in Washington, D.C. to Korean immigrants—is part of a much larger system of actions and reactions, of ideologies and policies, that I am increasingly cognizant of as I continue into adulthood. In this light, Kim's poetry for me is absolutely mandatory reading.

The ultimate effects of the Korean War, itself the result of western ideological interventions into Asia, will probably go untallied for the duration of my life if not longer. But I do not position the Korean War as exceptional in this light—it is another example of a particularly sad truism regarding human life as it has been lived up to this point: that victory usually accompanies demolition, that kingdoms, states, and communities are not eternal despite their projects, and that human psyches are exceptionally resilient—both to their advantage and detriment. The legacies of the political upheavals on the Korean peninsula for the past century have left an indelible mark on the consciousness of most Korean diasporic subjects. But do such upheavals always have to be the case? Are there

other formations for organizing human interactions that do not require violence? Myung Mi Kim seeks to suss out some alternative, some other position for humanity that does not capitulate to or accommodate such forces. Of the many beautiful aspects of her poetry, to me this feature is the greatest and the most uplifting.

Few writers describe the beauty of Kim's poetry, and given the fact that so much of it is addressed to the unrepresented or abject interstices of language, this oversight may be understandable. But I do want to iterate that her poetry is truly beautiful. It is beautiful in its percussive, incisively unflinching attention to language, and also in its gentle envelopment of the slightest sentiments. It is the rare poet who can move from "Obdurate sound Thereby insert interpret" (56) to "O hummingbird, swift trill / Open a page What does it look like" (102) in the space of the same book. But again, it is not just her language, but her project, which causes me to return to and re-appreciate her work over the years.

I am thrilled to see *Dura* reprinted, and am especially glad that Kim is garnering more critical acclaim and attention from the poetry community. I personally cannot imagine what sort of writer or individual I would be without having encountered her. I wish the same transformative experience to her future readers.