

Critics have variously placed Myung Mi Kim in the lineages of so-called high modernism, “experimental” poetry, and immigrant literatures. For example, Josephine Nock-Hee Park¹ argues for a particular connection between Kim and Pound,² while Jeannie Chiu³ calls for the necessity of “incorporating these experimental poets into the field of Asian American Studies” (85). Joseph Jonghyun Jeon,⁴ in a somewhat dissimilar vein, argues that “[o]n a fundamental level,” the opening poem “And Sing We” from Kim’s first book *Under Flag*,⁵ is about “immigration and assimilation. It therefore appropriates many of the issues common to Asian American literature—in particular loss,

¹ Josephine Nock-Hee Park. “‘Composed of Many Lengths of Bone’: Myung Mi Kim’s Reimagination of Image and Epic.” *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*. Ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, et al. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2006. 235-56.

² “Specifically, Kim’s work returns to Pound’s Image, reimagining this modernist poetic renewal, which had been shaped by fantasies of the ideogram” (Park, 235).

³ Jeannie Chiu. “Identities in Process: The Experimental Poetry of Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge and Myung Mi Kim.” *Asian North American Identities: Beyond the Hyphen*. Ed. Eleanor Ty and Donald C. Goellnicht. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2004. 84-101.

⁴ Joseph Jonghyun Jeon. “Speaking in Tongues: Myung Mi Kim’s Stylized Mouths.” *Studies in the Literary Imagination* 37.1 (2004): 125-48.

⁵ Myung Mi Kim. *Under Flag*. Berkeley: Kelsey Street Press, 1991. Hereafter *UF*.

dislocation, and displacement” (127). Park’s reading of Kim is helpful (though I find Kim’s relation to Pound to be somewhat less direct than Park’s reading would suggest). Chiu’s array of interesting readings, however, are framed by her assertion that Kim and fellow Asian America poet Mei-mei Bersenbrugge write “purposely obscure narratives” (84). Unfortunately, this description suggests that these poets evade meaning—or worse, confuse readers—“on purpose,” the same stereotypical barb often aimed at Language Poets. It also suggests that the ground for meaning is narration, the reading that Jeon wants to uphold in his assertion that Kim’s work is “about” immigration and assimilation. In this essay I investigate the grounds of meaning and “making sense” in Kim’s poems, which I assert are process oriented. These processes are made visible to the reader through the epistemological gestures laid bare in the poem’s formal and linguistic structures.

As I have argued elsewhere, Kim does explore conditions such as language loss, as Jeon shows, but she does so through an examination of the multiple meanings of “translation.”⁶ Like Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in *Dictee*, Kim’s explorations sometimes take the form of transcribing translation exercises. However, these “translations” do more than confer ideas expressed in one language into another. Kim’s translations not only draw our attention to the conditions of history—for example of “Chonui, a typical Korean town. In the distance, / a 155-mm shell has

⁶ See: Kathy Lou Schultz. “On Myung Mi Kim.” *Efforts and Affections: Women Poets on Mentorship*. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2008. 207-210.

exploded”—they also emphasize the writing act itself (*UF*, 16). Explorations of the processes of writing and thinking appear in all of Kim’s book-length works: *Under Flag* (1991), *The Bounty*⁷ (1996), *Dura*⁸ (1998), and *Commons*⁹ (2002). For example, in “Pollen Fossil Record,” the final piece in *Commons*, Kim writes: “The ideas of translation, translatability, transliteration, transcription” (109). Translation here is not a self-evident process, rather it is one of a set of “ideas,” concepts under review that lead to questions about whether ideas, events, or subjectivities are even capable of being translated. Kim moves from the idea of “translatability” to that of “transliteration,” raising more questions, this time about alphabets, sounds, and replacement. What is replaced? What is lost? Finally, “transcription” is added to the list: is it possible to copy or reproduce events or experiences? As she writes in a poet-ics statement for the anthology *American Poets in the 21st Century*: “The problem of [the presupposition of] [there already exists] a language for.”¹⁰ By emphasizing the gaps in thinking and perception, Kim’s work draws the reader’s attention to gaps in dominant ideologies rarely seen. For example, if one assumes that there is already “a language

⁷ Myung Mi Kim. *The Bounty*. Minneapolis: Chax Press, 1996. Hereafter *B*.

⁸ Myung Mi Kim. *Dura*. Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1998. Hereafter *D*.

⁹ Myung Mi Kim. *Commons*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

¹⁰ Myung Mi Kim. “Convolutions : the Precision, the Wild.” *American Poets in the 21st Century*. Ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2007. 251.

for” war or displacement, the ruptures necessarily created by subjective experiences are elided. Furthermore, these poems capture the ruptures that occur in the individual’s attempts to “make sense” of what can never be a coherent self.

The poet moves from word to word carefully in the line quoted above from “Pollen Fossil Record”—not only through a process of linking ideas—but also through a process of linking sounds: the repetition of “trans,” a prefix from Latin meaning “across, to or on the farther side of, beyond, over,”¹¹ emphasizing the many “crossings” that Kim’s work investigates, and the internal slant rhyme of “lit” and “script” in “transliteration, transcription.” This technique reveals, rather than conceals, the process of the poem’s making, asking the reader to investigate how the poet moves from one word to the next. Syntax, whose ordering logic and sense-making can supersede the activity of individual words as the reader moves across sentences, does not do the work in this line.

This focus upon sound as sense is also revealed in Kim’s choice of epigraphs and other framing materials in *The Bounty*. The opening piece, “Primer,” begins as follows:

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—to represent 14 single and 5 double consonants, Hangul starts with five basic symbols, which are shaped to suggest the articulators pronouncing them. For example, a small square depicts a closed mouth pronouncing /m/. (11)

¹¹ All definitions from: *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd Edition, 1998.

The book thus begins with a closed mouth, poised at the point of articulation. The exploration of sound continues with the epigraphs for “Anna O Addendum,” *The Bounty’s* final poem. The second of the two epigraphs is from Edmund Jabès: “. . . there is no such things [sic] as a word. There are consonants waiting to become vocables” (37). There are only sounds, waiting for the possibility of utterance.

In her analysis of a translation exercise included in the poem “Cosmography” from *Dura*, Park demonstrates how what I am calling “sound as sense” operates not only in the English language sounds, but also in the Korean language sounds that haunt the text. The translation exercise from “Cosmography” that Park analyzes involves the following phrases being translated from English into Korean: “a short lyric poem or, the founder of family,” “an ancestral tablet,” “a new world,” and “dried radish leaves.” Park writes:

These four words have a mysterious connection in English; the first three phrases describe origins, but the fourth is a puzzling addition. Yet the inclusion of this final word is understandable if one hears the Korean: the sounds of “a new world,” *shin-sae-gae*, sounds like “dried radish leaves,” *shi-rae-ghee*. In fact, the first two words in this list rhyme in Korean, and the third and fourth describe a more complicated connection; we can see that the Korean words drive the movement in this list. (244)

This investigation of the process of making connections and sense is developed elsewhere as the poet takes stock of the “scripts” one is accustomed to reading. As the speaker

proposes in “And Sing We”: “If we live against replication / Our scripts stricken” (14). The “we” in the poem may “live against replication” with “scripts stricken” as casualties of wartime, or this living “against,” may in fact be a refusal to be represented by “scripts,” by predetermined official stories. The poem sets in motion an epistemological procedure in the space between the individual and the text. Unhinged from grammar, and with temporalities collapsed, the reader must analyze the very idea of sense. How does one “make sense”? By whom is this “sense” made, and do others uncritically accept it? The investigation into how knowledge and sense are made is initiated again each time a new reader takes up the poem; put another way, the reader is engaged in an active process of both making and questioning sense. In “Making Common The Commons,” Warren Liu¹² writes: “For the reader looking for a bit of authorial guidance, the answer to the question of what, exactly, lies in the space between ‘reading and text making, discourses and disciplines, document and documenting,’ returns only in the form of a negative; it is that which *Commons* elides.” My reading, however, proposes that that space is positive, rather than negative, and it is “positive” rather than in Liu’s terms “elided” because of the active process of thinking and making that occurs there. It is the very activity of the poem.

In contrast, reading translation as “reciprocal,” Jeon writes the following of “And Sing We”: “As a social

¹² Warren Liu. “Making Common the Commons: Myung Mi Kim’s Ideal Subject.” *American Poets in the 21st Century*. Ed. Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2007. 252-66.

project, the poem perhaps lacks distinctiveness; in many ways, it typifies the repeated theme of bridging and resolving conflicting identity positions in Asian American literature” (128). Yet, even the passage that Jeon quotes retains—rather than resolves—conflicts:

Must it ring so true
So we must sing it

To span even yawning distance
And would we be near then

What would the sea be, if we were near it (*UF*,13)

In fact, the passage contains a series of questions: Must it ring so true? And would we be near then? What would the sea be, if we were near it? Rather than “bridging” the “yawning distance,” the passage retains ideological, spatial, and linguistic incongruities. Even though “we must sing it,” “must it ring so true”? Even if we could “span even yawning distance,” “would we be near then”? And even if we were near it, “what would the sea be”? These lines emphasize dislocation and distance, never giving away where “here” might be. Kim writes in *Commons*:

Swerves, oddities, facts, miscues, remnants—threnody and meditation—the perpetually incomplete task of tracking what enters the field of perception (the writing act)—its variegated and grating musics, cadences, temporalities. (107)

By emphasizing shifting temporalities, Kim demonstrates that transcription is always incomplete, giving way to these

“Swerves, oddities, facts, miscues, remnants.”

Perceptions contained in memory, then, are also open to question: “Once we leave a place is it there” (UF, 14). The emotive, corporeal experience of memory and the place itself, are they in fact “there”? Our identities and memories may be made of things that precede us: “Not to have seen it yet inheriting it” (UF, 17) as if we might also precede ourselves: “What we might have explored, already discovered” (UF, 15). This last line also contains within it a sense of looking back at oneself, creating an unsettling temporality in which we both precede and follow ourselves. These simultaneous acts of looking forward and back track the thought perception carried through in the act of writing. This “perpetually incomplete task of tracking what enters the field of perception” does not re-sort experience into a linear continuum, but instead allows the variegated musics to “grate.”

By retaining, rather than smoothing over incongruities, Kim’s work also serves as an alternative to official records of history. This theme is reflected in the title of her second book, *The Bounty*. One definition of “bounty” is a boon or gift, such as how a family may consider the “gift” of a child (this text contains a poem addressed to her son, Malcolm). However, “bounty” is also a military term: a reward given to soldiers. Bounty may also indicate a commercial relation: “a sum of money paid to merchants or manufacturers for the encouragement of some particular branch of industry.” Interestingly, a usage from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is a “King’s (or Queen’s) bounty: a sum of money given from

the royal purse to a mother who has given birth to three or more children at once.” Thus, the state propagates commercial relations that will be most beneficial to the rulers. In a reconfiguration of the epic form, references to kings and emperors abound in Kim’s work: “Ordnung ordnance ordonnance in the new / King’s name drums / And pig squeals” (B, 72). Codes of behavior and organization are set in contrast with “ordnance” or artillery. The violence of the codes and the war is initiated “in the new / King’s name,” an order put in place against a cacophony of sounds including military drums and the cries of animals. This order sets in motion a new means of economic exchange: “Coins imprinted with kings’ and emperors’ faces” (D, 70). Such events occur across boundaries of nation states, whether the ruler be called “king” or “emperor.” Further, the repetitious cycle of this process is so ubiquitous that its description occurs in nursery rhymes: “In plural. Numerous and countable. The king is in / the counting house counting his money” (D, 71). What Kim is able to accomplish, then, is not to obscure these relationships, but instead to lay them bare. By providing us with an “Arrival Which Is Not An Arrival” Kim activates the space in between: putting one foot, putting one word, in front of the other (UF, 32).¹³

¹³ I wish to thank Robin Tremblay-McGaw for her feedback on an earlier draft of this essay.