

Transnational Identity Formation in Korean American Literature: Catherine Chung's *Forgotten Country*

Eszter Mohácsi

Kodolányi János University

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Abstract. The USA has always been a melting pot of different nationalities. Inevitably, this diversity has also been presented in its literature. Asian American literature, which is a fairly new subject of literary studies, presents one example of the States' varied literary landscape. Some recurring themes studied in works written by authors from the Asian diaspora are hybridized identity, language, gender, trauma, and belonging. This paper also highlights the theme of identity and identity formation in connection with recent theories concerning transnational identities and second-generation immigrants, focusing on Catherine Chung's *Forgotten Country* (2012). As searching for one's own identity is a major part of the struggles of the adolescence stage, it is quite natural that questions of identity are emphasized in case of second-generation Asian Americans growing up in a culture distinctively different from that of their parents'. In the novel, the protagonist, Janie, clearly has bicultural identity, whereas her younger sister, Hannah, struggles with her Korean heritage, which she seems to reject. By the end, as a result of a homeland trip and their father's death, both sisters comprehend more of their family's past traumas and their homeland's history, which enables them to acknowledge their Korean heritage and reclaim their lives.

Key Words. Korean American literature, transnational identity, second-generation immigrant, Catherine Chung, multigenerational trauma

The USA has always been an amalgam of quite distinctive cultures. As Lewitt and Waters observe, in 2000 in the US “10 percent of the nation’s population (...) were children of immigrants, born primarily to the Latin American and Asian migrants who began arriving in the 1960s” and 20.5 percent of the population were either first- or second-generation immigrants (2006: 1). Naturally, this diversity has been presented in the country’s literature as well; Asian American literature, a fairly new subject of literary studies, presents one example of the States’ varied literary landscape. However, it should be noted that the term Asian American is in fact quite misleading. As Eric Liu observes: “Asian Americans belong not to a race so much as to a confederation, a big yellow-and-brown tent that covers a panoply of interests. And while those interests converge usefully on some points—antidiscrimination, open immigration—they diverge on many others” (1998: 74). Therefore, this paper will concentrate on the literary works of one specific subcategory of Asian Americans: Korean Americans.

Some recurring themes generally studied in works written by authors from the Asian diaspora are hybridized identity, language, gender, trauma, and belonging. This paper highlights the theme of identity and identity formation in connection with recent theories concerning transnational identities, while also alluding to gender, loss, and trauma. The paper will briefly discuss the evolution of the theme of identity in Korean American literature, focusing on Catherine Chung’s *Forgotten Country* (2012). Thus, it will mostly discuss not the immigrant experience, but rather that of the second generation. As searching for one’s own identity is a major part of the struggles of the adolescence stage, it is quite natural that questions of identity are emphasized in case of second-generation Asian Americans growing up in a culture distinctively different from that of their parents’. In some cases, eventually a positive sense of identity can be attained, although oftentimes through loss, whereas in others, the subject remains an outsider in both worlds; there are examples of both outcomes in the Korean American literary works.

First, transnationalism as a theoretical framework will be briefly considered, then a short review of Korean American literature will be provided, centered around the theme of identity. Finally, Catherine Chung’s *Forgotten Country* will be examined as an example of the identity formation of teenagers among second-generation Korean Americans.

Transnational Identity

While initially, transnationalism as a term was used in international relations, it was first used in anthropology to describe the “process by which transmigrants, through their daily activities, forge and sustain multi-stranded social, economic, and political relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement, and through which they create transnational social fields that cross national borders” (Basch, Glick-Schiller, and Szanton-Blanc 1994: 6). There are several approaches to the field ranging from an interest in postnational politics and economics to questions of identity formation or transnational migration. There are also specific studies concerning the second generation, which includes both the children of immigrants, already born in the host country, and “people who came to the United States as children, usually accompanied by their parents, but who grew up and attended school in this country (Lewitt and Waters 2006: 12). In the novel discussed, the second type of second generation immigration will be observed.

Lewis and Waters define transnational behavior as “interconnectedness across borders that enables individuals to sustain multiple identities and loyalties” (2006: 6). Observing contemporary migrants, it can be seen that “[r]ather than severing their ties to their countries of origin and trading one membership for another, increasing numbers of migrants sustain economic, political, and religious ties to their homelands even as they work, vote, and pray in the countries that have received them” (Lewitt and Waters 2006: 2). Their children also often engage in transnational practices, although most of the time not as much as the parents. According to a study by Esteban-Guitart and Vila, in the case of immigrants, three strategies of identity construction exist: ethnic flight, active opposition, and biculturalism. Out of the three, the majority of immigrant children develop bicultural identity, which is the most adaptive style. Bicultural identity in this context means “a fusion between their family tradition and the new culture, combining the two systems through the development of multicultural and multilingual skills, which become part of their identity” (2015: 18). Naturally, rapid communication and travel opportunities make contact with their country of origin easier than ever before, and the attitude of the host country is also usually more supportive of multiculturalism and transnational identity than in the past.

In an attempt to understand “how transnationalism might be shaping future American ethnicity”, Perlmann proposes observing cultural practices and adolescent self-identity, while claiming that assimilation, as it occurred in the past, “cannot be expected in the future” (2006: 217). The question that naturally arises considering second-generation immigrants is whether

they will “keep up the transnational ties of their parents or abandon them in favor of new ties in the United States” (Jones-Correa 2006: 221). However, it should be noted that, contrary to what was stated earlier, assimilation and transnationalism should not be seen as contradictory processes. In fact, “there are multiple ways in which immigrants and their children can combine transnationalism and assimilative strategies” (Jones-Correa 2006: 231). In fact, oftentimes second-generation immigrants consider their multiple identities as an advantage rather than a hindrance.

In her study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans conducted between 1992 and 1997, Nazli Kibria observes the connection between homeland trips, transnationalism, and identity, focusing on how these homeland trips provide a “focal point for reflection and discussion of their [the second generations’] relationship to Chinese or Korean societies and, more generally, the meaning of membership and belonging in the Chinese or Korean collective” (2006: 297). She notes how the majority of her informants have talked about belonging to the Chinese or Korean community, respectively, without giving it a conscious thought. When asked about national identity, in case of Korean Americans, they “emphasize the significance of a shared history of national oppression and struggle,” and describe belonging to the “Korean collectivity as inexorable and primordial” (2006: 300). They also use the word “chong” frequently, which is “one part love, equal parts affinity, empathy, obligation, entanglement, bondage and blood” (Abelman and Lie 1997: 39). As Kibria notes, these primordial notions of identity help second-generation Korean Americans affirm their identity, as in reality, they often feel uncertain about their cultural membership as Koreans. However, they also generally have contrasting, primordial and individualistic—the idea that belonging to a group is voluntary— notions of identity as well, which naturally causes unresolved tensions, muted by “their recognition of the significance of race in the United States” (2006: 301). As a second-generation Korean American describes her father’s resistance to outmarriage:

Koreans are very very proud and stubborn people, and my father is even more so than most Koreans. A lot of his friends, the old-timers, their children can’t speak Korean, have married non-Koreans, and in general are not really Korean-identified. [...] Koreans are very nationalistic, they want to keep the Korean blood pure. He’s told me that it was unacceptable for me to marry a non-Korean. When he came here, you know, he really felt the prejudice; it was the sixties, and there weren’t too many Koreans around. He remembers that, and he tells me, ‘You think you’re American and you think that you’re widely accepted, but remember that people still see your physical features. If you spend

time with them, they realize that you were raised here and you speak English fluently. But you don't have the time to sit with every person, to educate every person on the bus or the subway.' (2006: 301)

Undoubtedly, notions of primordial identity help immigrants face racial discrimination and prejudice, as they can find pride and self-esteem in their Korean identity. Many informants in the study also highlighted how, when they were humiliated or teased due to their different racial background and physical features, their parents always reminded them that they were Korean, and that they should be proud of it. Interestingly, transmitting cultural practices to their children was less important than asserting a strong ethnic identity.

While discussing the effects of the homeland trips of second-generation Korean Americans, Kibria highlights that most informants described their first impressions of Korea in deeply emotional terms. In addition, they immediately felt a sense of belonging, as they looked like everyone else: it was easy to blend in, as opposed to their experience in the States. Some participants also noted that as a result of the trip, they felt closer to their families; they became "more appreciative and understanding of the cultural traditions and practices with which they had been raised, ones that they may have rebelled against in the past" (2006: 305). On the other hand, many Korean Americans felt that they were ultimately treated as different, partly due to language difficulties and partly to cultural mannerisms; for instance, several women faced disapproval "for not conforming to norms of appropriate behavior for women. That is, they were seen as too loud, aggressive, and not appropriately deferential to men" (2006: 306). Hence, in a way homeland trips often affirmed the American identity of second-generation immigrants.

Identity in Korean American Literature: A Brief Overview

As Elaine Kim observes, when early Korean American writing emerged, it was at a time of deeply rooted racism concerning Asians in general, both in official contexts and in mass culture. They were seen as "grotesquely alien 'others'", and "were materially and discursively excluded from the mainstream of American life, denied subjectivity and defined instead according to the degree of threat they were thought to pose to the dominant culture at particular points in time" (2001: 2). As "destined always to be outsiders" (Song 2015: 3) and struggling "to even establish themselves as discursive subjects", the first Korean writers oftentimes desperately tried to show the majority that they could be successfully Westernized or Americanized, hence repressing

their Korean identity and roots; “dealing with subtleties, hybridities, paradoxes, and layers must have seemed impossibly luxurious” (E. Kim 2001: 2) for them.

The first works written by Korean American authors were largely autobiographical, portraying the perspective of educated exiles, and often showing the particular anguish they felt as a triumphant return to their homeland was not even a sustaining illusion in their case: Korea as an independent country did not exist then, as it was annexed by Japan. The most prominent among them was Younghill Kang (1903-72), who, as the first writer in English, came to represent Korea for the Western reader. While he reinforced the familiar notion of Asians as “backward peoples yearning for the light of the West” (E. Kim 2001: 3), he was also highly critical of the US, providing an unflattering view of the underside of American life in the 1920s and 30s from a minority perspective in his second novel *East Goes West* (1937). Kang questioned “American nationalist narratives of progress, equality, assimilation, and upward mobility with his portrait of Korean immigrants’ endless wandering” (E. Kim 2001: 4), and ultimately showed that the American dream remained unattainable for non-white characters.

Other Korean American writers such as Richard E. Kim and Ty Pak also problematized the incongruencies between their protagonists’ present life in the States and their Korean past and commented on the difficulties of immigration and assimilation. Yet, the most intriguing authors concerning identity were female writers who disputed simple nationalism and even questioned the notion of unitary identities. Among them, the most modern was Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, who in her genre-bending book *Dictee* (1982) challenged the notion of progress both from fragmentation to wholeness and from immigrant to citizen while deconstructing “any understanding of linear history or narrative” (Park 2015: 159). In her book consisting of nine chapters, titled as the nine muses, each chapter centers around women who range from “Greek goddesses to a Korean shamanistic matriarch and from historical figures to fictional ones” (Lee 2006: 78): what they have in common is that they all reject their given roles dictated by a patriarchal society. Through her writing style—nonlinear, cyclical, fluid, and fragmented—Cha dissected patriotism, the exile identity, patriarchy, and transgenerational trauma passed down from mother to daughter.

Since the 1990s, there has been a dramatic increase in Korean American cultural activities. Identity has shifted into more hybrid and heterogenous forms; perhaps partly due to “the crisis of representation and identity” (E. Kim 2001: 12) several Korean Americans endured after the 1992 Los Angeles riots, during which they were targeted by other non-white minority groups. Even the media portrayed Korean Americans as racist, “inarticulate aliens” (E. Kim 2001: 12) concerned only with money and property. As Elaine Kim notes, after this incident,

Korean Americans “wanted more than just visibility. They wanted to be the ones to define the terms of their visibility” (2001: 12). Several authors, such as Patti Kim in *A Cab Called Reliable* (1997) and Nora Okja Keller in *Comfort Woman* (1997) emphasized that their Korean heritage is only part of their identities, while they deconstructed the widespread image of Asians displayed in mainstream American media as a model minority. Nevertheless, ethnic identity has still been a central topic for many authors active from the 90s. In his first novel *Native Speaker* (1994), Chang-Rae Lee examines the double consciousness of his protagonist, Henry Park, a Korean American spy, who has to spy on a Korean American politician running for mayor in New York City. Henry feels alienated and isolated throughout the whole novel: he betrays a fellow Korean American, but still finds he can gain no acceptance into American society; even his high-class white wife divorces him. As Chang-Rae Lee himself confessed in an interview:

Complete assimilation into American society is, at this point, impossible. To most white Americans I will never be a true American, despite my birth here. On the other hand, cultural self-identification is problematic because my culture—that is, what I know and what I have grown up with—is American. Even if, as a Korean American, my self-identity may have more links to immigrant culture than, say, a fifth-generation Chinese American, attempting to reestablish a Korean identity is extremely problematic at best, since Korean Americans are already ontologically set apart from Korea and have within their own subgroups regional and class differences. Yet, this dichotomy of cultural self-identity vs. assimilation seems to me to be a forced one, since rigid demarcations of kinds of personal acculturation doesn’t have to be one or the other. To survive and be a functioning member of American society, while also keeping your sanity, I guess an uneasy combination of both is necessary. (2001: 182)¹

Thus, while identity has unavoidably become more hybrid and heterogeneous, it is still a major concern in many writers’ work and personal life. Nevertheless, particularly after the turn of the century it could be questioned whether Asian American literature should be a separate field of study, or whether the topics it centers around are more universal. For instance, Chang-Rae Lee’s Pulitzer finalist Korean War novel, *The Surrendered* (2010), does not focus solely on the Korean War but, as Park points out, is “a meditation on the nature of war itself” (2015: 163),

¹ Translated by Dafne Zur.

with the Korean War only serving as one of the military conflicts the novel addresses, while most of the novel's plot is not even set in Korea. In a series of interviews with Korean American authors, Song asked whether they saw themselves as Asian American writers and how they felt about being called as such. The interviewed authors were "candid in expressing their discomfort, even active dislike, with the categorization" (2015: 13). It is partly due to expectations projected unto them and the fact that they should produce a specific kind of work centering around immigration to be successful, which they feel limiting.

Overall, Korean American literature has become a lot more complex and more difficult to define. Nevertheless, most Korean American authors are still conscious of their Asian heritage and question notions of identity in their works. As Kichung Kim concludes while discussing the future of Korean American literature: "Korean diaspora literature in the twenty-first century will thus necessarily be a literature of hybridity and heterogeneity" (2002: 272). The complex nature of identity and the necessity of incorporating Korea in it are strongly connected in Chung's *Forgotten Country* as well.

Catherine Chung's *Forgotten Country*

Forgotten Country, Chung's first novel, was published to critical acclaim in 2012 and received an Honorable Mention for the 2013 PEN/Hemingway Award. Its protagonist and narrator, Janie, narrating the story in her first-person point of view, is a second-generation immigrant, who was already eight years old when they moved to the US with her parents and little sister. As in several other Korean American novels, the reason behind immigration is political persecution. The family must flee after the Gwangju Uprising in 1980, due to a political pamphlet composed by the father. At that time, an anti-democratic, military government was in power in Korea, where disagreeing with the government had serious repercussions. Thus, even though the mother desperately wants to stay, they leave for Michigan, where the father can obtain a job as an engineer. However, after not visiting Korea even once during the following twenty years, the parents decide to move back. The father has stomach cancer, which has already metastasized, and ironically, he can receive the best possible treatment in Korea. Janie decides to go to Korea with them, after finding Hannah, her sister who has abandoned their family and disappeared, to tell her the news. Half of the novel is set in Korea, where the father is receiving treatment, and another considerable part of the work consists of Janie's flashbacks of her upbringing, focusing on their move to the States, her difficulties while trying to fit in at school, and her studies in mathematics: a field which she has chosen to live her father's dream.

The way the sisters, Janie and Hannah, relate to their parents and their country of origin is strikingly different. Janie develops a bicultural identity, whereas her sister Hannah tries to reject her Korean roots and completely assimilate to American culture. The parents also have disparate attitudes towards the US. Even as a child, Janie knows that her mother does not want to relocate just by “watching her feet, which began to shuffle after [her] father announced the move, as though they threw down invisible roots that needed to be pulled out with each step” (2012: 718)². The mother longs to return to Korea for years, while the father quickly considers the States as their home; although the fact that he plants trees and creates an enclosed garden shows how he needs a safe place too. They interact with their family members regularly, yet, never return, even after Korea transforms into a democratic country. Thus, the sisters only have a chance to go on a homeland trip when their father is dying, which heightens the significance of the visit.

Prior to examining each sister’s bicultural identity, the importance of names should be discussed. Originally, the sisters are called Jeehyun and Haejin, but they have to choose an American name to assimilate; or rather, their new school’s principal chooses one for them. The context of this act is also significant, as confiscating people’s names is a traumatic memory for Koreans. During the Japanese occupation, the Japanese government forced people to abandon their original, Korean names and adopt a Japanese one. Furthermore, they were disallowed to speak or write in Korean. Nevertheless, as Janie’s grandmother tells her, most Koreans defied the law: “They wanted to make us forget [...], but at home we spoke Korean” (2012: 2280). She also confides in Janie that her “father’s family refused to take a Japanese name”, for which “[t]hey were punished” (2012: 2280). The way the mother is pressured into changing her daughters’ names is not unlike the situation in the past. She is escorted to the principal’s office with her two daughters, where, after appearing friendly and easy-going by telling the three women to “[j]ust call [him] Mr. B.”, the principal tells the mother that “[her] girls need names”, by which he means “[p]roper names”, that is, “American names” (2012: 1157). Janie remembers that he also speaks loudly, noting that “[i]n those days, everyone spoke more loudly at [her] parents than they seemed to speak to anyone else” (2012: 1160). The mother tries to resist feebly, saying that her daughters are Korean and have grown up with their names, but as the principal insists, she leaves the office silently and defeated. Janie concludes the event as such: “Being called by a name that everyone was able to say was less disorienting than having everyone say my real name wrong, and anyway, I liked it. It made me feel as if I belonged. It

² As a Kindle version of the novel was used, the numbers refer to the Location Number.

was only my parents who minded” (2012: 1165). The fact that names are crucial in the development of self and an integral part of our identities is undisputable. As Ralph Ellison states, “It is through our names that we first place ourselves in the world. Our names, being the gift of others, must be made our own” (2003: 192). Hence, robbing someone of their name is equivalent of seizing control over them by confiscating a part of their identity. In Janie’s and Hannah’s case, they do make their new names their own, and the fact they are called like other regular Americans help bridge the gap between them and their classmates. Yet, not providing them with a choice and not involving their parents in the decision-making clearly shows the complete disregard at the time of their native language and culture. As for the parents, they can rightfully feel that they left one authoritarian government only to be placed in another oppressive society, where they are considered less and are treated as such. Even the seemingly polite principal’s careless words show how he believes that Korean culture is less worthy than American, and that complete assimilation is the only pertinent decision in the immigrants’ case.

Nevertheless, Korean culture has remained central to the sisters’ identities, especially in the case of Janie. Her command of the language never falters, and after returning to Korea, where she is called “Jeehyuni, the diminutive, the little girl name”, she feels “cared for, and safe”: she even “wonder[s] if [she] would also have been a different person had [she] grown up in Korea: more confident and easygoing” (2012: 2143). In the States, when people look at her, she feels “uncomfortable” and “awkward”, as if she “was under an intense light, onstage, jerkily moving around” (2012: 1270). She is very self-conscious as she has always looked different from her peers. Even her faith suffers as a result: about heaven, she states, “it sounded too much like one more country where everyone spoke a different language” (2012: 1029), which clearly shows how traumatic the move has been for Janie: all the more so, because its reason has never been disclosed, she could only comprehend some of what was happening in the country at that time. For her, “nothing is more important than belonging. Nothing is as satisfying” (2012: 1141), and she learns she can only belong to her household.

They have a very tight-knit family, and Janie grows up as the older sister, who always has to protect Hannah, the more rebellious child. Furthermore, as their parents do not have a son, she needs to be one as well: she feels she is “the one who tried to always be the missing daughter, the missing son, the one who had to try to fill the missing pieces and keep our family together” (2012: 3696). In Korean culture, having a son is crucial, as only they can pass on the family line. As Janie’s maternal grandmother tells Janie’s mother: “You are nothing without a son” (2012: 1184). In fact, after moving to the US, the parents try to have a son as well. Janie, in retrospect, notes that her mother “felt marked everywhere she went, simultaneously visible

and overlooked”, and thinks that perhaps her parents wanted a son because “a male heir might root them in this country; a boy might have the power to connect the present to the past” (2012: 1194). However, they have a very difficult time adapting and fight constantly to the extent that Janie confesses they “became unfamiliar to me. They became unsafe” (2012: 1202) during their first year in America. They are victims of hate crime—their mailbox is often knocked off and their cars’ windows are broken—, and the father feels he has “to be careful all the time” (2012: 1194) at his workplace. He, who was supposed to be a genius mathematician with a brilliant career ahead has to be content with a mediocre life. Nevertheless, after aborting two daughters, the mother refuses to continue trying to conceive a boy, after which they have a terrible fight with her husband. She tells Janie that Janie should be a good, compliant wife who obeys her husband, thus Janie promises that she would “practice” to “be everything a husband could want, everything [her] parents might wish” (2012: 1225). Janie remembers this moment as the time when she “first learned that love is a kind of disappearing” (2012: 1225), which evolves into a central notion in her attitude towards family.

Korean folktales are woven into the narrative, and there is one central story that illuminates Janie’s character and her loyalty to her father. It is called the story of Simchung and is about a beautiful girl, who obediently takes care of her blind father, a beggar. When she hears about an opportunity to return her father’s eyesight, she sacrifices herself to the Dragon King, without her father knowing. Later, she is miraculously saved, and is married by a king. They plan a banquet for blind people in order to locate Simchung’s father. The story ends happily, with father and daughter embracing each other, and the father’s eyesight miraculously restored. Simchung is praised by everyone for her filial duty and devotion. Janie shares this story with her American friends at elementary school and is “surprised when they smirk”; she confesses: “This made me feel worse than their disgust at the food we ate in my house, or their laughter at my parents’ accents” (2012: 1721). The story that is so significant for Janie and is symbolic of her image of herself is incomprehensible for her friends. Later, even Hannah says she has never liked the story, even though she passionately played the part of Simchung as well as a child; it reflects how, as opposed to Janie, she has grown apart from her family. Filial duty as one of the most important values is indeed very far from the American mindset but central in Asian families, which naturally causes a clash between the two cultures. It is why second-generation children often find it a herculean task to adapt to both cultures: sometimes the two are stark opposites. Janie resolves this conflict by choosing her family: she has less friends and devotes herself to her studies.

As for her education, she chooses mathematics to fulfill her father's dream, admitting: "I knew I was living a phantom version of his dreams. This thrilled me, as if I'd found a way into one of our parallel lives, and reclaimed something that had been taken away" (2012: 1745). By parallel lives, what Janie means is that since their move, she has been imagining her life in Korea simultaneously:

As I grew up the story lines kept diverging, and I tried to map out all the different paths our lives might have taken if certain circumstances had been altered. This habit contributed to a sense of mine that my current life was not quite solid, not quite real. That might have been why as a mathematician, I chose topology as my field, studying how certain objects that intersect in three-dimensional space don't in four-dimensional space. (2012: 1738)

Janie narrates her story in retrospect, which helps her be more conscious about her decisions and personality. It is evident that her family and her cultural background are strong but ambivalent forces in her life: she is constantly discriminated against in elementary school, she finds it more difficult to make friends than her sister, and she sacrifices a lot for her family. Yet, her family means safety and acceptance. When she first moves to go to university, she tries to loosen her family bonds, but after her boyfriend, who attends the same university, abuses and almost kills her, Janie feels very self-conscious and unsafe in her new environment, and yearns for her family. Later, when she returns from Korea for a short visit to her university, in order to progress with her PhD, she again has some bad experiences with her advisor, and realizes that "[e]verything that mattered, everyone who cared about me, was elsewhere" (2012: 3171).

Her choice of further studies is similarly ambivalent: when she thinks about changing majors to History, her father lets her know that anything other than math "would be a disappointment" (2012: 334). Later in Korea, her father's cousin tells her: "You're going to fulfill your father's potential [...] That's why we have children, after all" (2012: 2177). Thus, she often feels she is only pursuing her studies for her family's sake and feels "a terrible pang remembering how [her] parents had told [her] this when [she] was growing up, It is for you we work this hard. It is for you we do everything" (2012: 2199). On the other hand, mathematics is something that has "come with [her] from Korea to America, and its familiarity ha[s] pulled [her] through those first bewildering years. [Janie] liked its solidity, the possibility of discovering a truth around which no further argument need swirl" (2012: 155). As opposed to identity and sometimes strained family relations, mathematics creates a safe place for the

protagonist, where she can feel closer to her roots, both in the sense of Korea and her father. When she talks about mathematics with her father, “the words flowed, pure and easy. Here were rules we could both abide by, here was a language that was eloquent, and spoke to us about the world” (2012: 162). In addition, mathematics provides a way to deal with overwhelming situations: for Janie it is “reassuring [...] to live in the world of abstract ideas” as it untethers “you from the physical world, and cut[s] you loose from reality” (2012: 2750). She also feels that completing her dissertation “would build a bridge to [her] father’s past” (2012: 2994), which is why she desperately tries to finish prior to her father’s eventual demise. Overall, mathematics works as a metaphor for Janie’s bond with her homeland and her father; that is, her roots. As her father tells her: “An equation with no roots has no solution” (2012: 2872). The pun also works in Korean, which reinforces the idea that a bridge indeed exists between two distinct cultures. Janie is stuck in her dissertation and struggling hopelessly, but after her return to Korea and after finally seeing the house where her father grew up and understanding more of her family’s past and her own, she is finally able to continue.

As opposed to Janie, Hannah has been more rebellious and defiant as a teenager. While at university, she suddenly disappears without a trace, moving to California, completely severing her ties with her family. Her estrangement can be seen in her complete assimilation to American culture: she forgets to speak Korean, she is disinclined to eat Asian food, and she is not an obedient child. As Janie reminisces: “I’m not sure when things changed for her, but until Hannah forgot how to speak Korean, we had spent hours pretending to be our parents in their youth: it had been the best and deepest of mysteries to us” (2012: 123), which shows that Hannah’s transformation has been a gradual process. The reason is partly that Hannah is abused by a Korean relative, another child, at an early age, but also the clash between American and Korean culture and the different expectations. For Hannah, the high expectations are stifling, and the traditionally close-knit Asian family proves to be too tight. She tells Janie that she has “had to leave” because her family “wanted [her] to be someone [she] wasn’t” (2012: 1578). Nevertheless, after she realizes how serious her father’s illness is, she follows her family to Korea. There, Janie realizes that Hannah has “kn[own] things about” Korea. Although Janie has believed that Hannah “cut herself off” from their family entirely, “there were these threads she had thrown out in our direction, and followed. She had been tracking us, paying attention, when I thought she was wholly gone” (2012: 2524). She realizes that probably Hannah has been “lonely as well” (2012: 276), even if she has had more friends and has been seemingly more successful at assimilation. It is revealed that Hannah has been planning to study biodiversity in Korea, and her advisor is Korean. Therefore, it is clear that Hannah has not abandoned her

Korean heritage completely; rather just needed some time away from her family to understand and accept the influence of Korean culture in her own life.

As previously discussed, homeland trips often affirm the Korean identity of second-generation Korean Americans. Just like in Kibria's cited study, both Janie and Hannah feel a sense of belonging and simultaneously feel closer to their parents and other family members. Janie instantly remarks upon the fact that everyone looks like her, and although before their return, she has felt "jealous" (2012: 2208) of her father's ancestral home and the fact that it is still important to him after so many years, when they take him to the house he grew up in to die, she is "surprised by a sense of recognition, a feeling in [her] bones that [she] ha[s] come home" (2012: 3395). She can picture her father in his youth and observes: "I would not have been able to explain what it meant to me—this image of my father so young and determined, ready to meet the future, not knowing what it held, or everything that would happen next" (2012: 3441). Through meeting her father's friends and all living relatives, she learns more about her father's past and can assess the complex relationships between family members. In addition, through her father's and mother's story, Janie and Hannah get closer to Korean history. The father was orphaned during the Korean War at the age of six; they managed to escape to the South with his older sister, the only survivors of their nuclear family, where they were taken in by their cousin. In the mother's family, in two generations prior they had lost a daughter, and both these losses are closely connected to Korea's tragic history. Janie's maternal grandmother lost her mother and her newborn sister during the independence protest against the Japanese, then she lost her own daughter to North Korean soldiers, abducting young girls from the South. What has made this loss even more painful was that it was unspeakable: Janie's aunt was quickly buried and the discussion around her silenced, as a living relative in North Korea would have posed an enormous threat to the family. Inevitably, silencing trauma makes it more difficult to overcome it, and this wound of the lost sister has been festering since then.

All these losses affect how Janie creates bonds with people. After selling their house in the States, she contemplates her parents' losses and confesses that she felt a "selfish relief" that "everyone dead in their lives had died before" her; she "was glad [she] had not had to suffer" and "grateful that there were fewer people to keep track of, that there was less to lose" (2012: 608). Clearly, as a result of multigenerational trauma, she is afraid of creating closer relationships. As her grandmother says, "We are nothing but our history" (2012: 2285), but before her visit to Korea, Janie considers history "treacherous: a tangled path back to what, [she] didn't know" (2012: 2287), due to the repressed nature of the traumatic events in her family. No wonder she believes as a child that "everything important in [their] lives was hidden"

(2012: 1067). By starting to discuss these painful stories from the past, for instance Janie's disappeared aunt, Janie can finally reclaim her past, and learn about her history. She understands that they have returned to Korea not only to save her father but "to make his death somehow beautiful. We had wanted all the visitors, the green mountains, and the hot, white sun—to sit here beside him and face the painful, vibrant beauty of his ravaged body. Perhaps in some way I had always been waiting for the gift of this fierce and desperate love" (2012: 3234): the return to Korea is indeed the father's final gift to his family.

At the end of the novel, Janie uses another parallel from science. While taking a class on knot theory, she has learned that some knots cannot be unraveled without cutting them apart: "Sometimes it can't be undone. For my whole life my family had been so tightly bound that we had stifled each other just trying to breathe, just trying to go our own ways. I had worried I would never get free. And now, Hannah and I would board our separate flights and cross the world and leave my mother behind" (2012: 3825). Thus, the sisters can finally live their own lives but at the same time can feel at home in Korea. They understand their mother's parable that "[e]ven plants live longer if they're closer to their families" (2012: 2111), but also that plants need to breathe to grow healthy.

Conclusion

Inevitably, identity and belonging have been central topics in Asian American literature. When Asian American writings commenced, the identity of the exile was in focus, and authors oftentimes discussed how assimilation was desirable but hopeless for their protagonists. After a few decades, multiple layers of identity have been portrayed: assimilation and ethnic identity have ceased to be one or the other, but rather two sides of the same coin. Several Korean American writers now belong to the second or even third generation, thus the portrayal of a more heterogeneous, transnational identity has become the norm rather than the exception. *Forgotten Country* is one example among many in which the protagonist needs to comprehend and accept their own roots and history to reclaim their lives. Janie is literally stuck in her dissertation, just as she is stuck in her life, before she finally returns to Korea. Like Janie, Hannah is also lost; she needs to reestablish her bonds with her family, for which she yearns, to continue her life in a meaningful way. In the end, they both establish a healthier relationship with their family and their native country.

Before Janie leaves Korea, her mother tells her about the day she disappeared, a few days before their move to the States: she went to the DMZ, longing for her lost sister. There,

she watches “the deer skim over land no human foot had ventured to cross in twenty years. The thought came to her suddenly, with the shock of revelation: All boundaries are imagined” (2012: 3549). The same conclusion applies to identity: the sisters do not have to choose between Korea and the States or their family and their own interests, but can synthesize all their different layers of identity into one.

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Eszter Enikő Mohácsi received her doctoral degree in Comparative Literature and Comparative Culture at Korea University, Seoul, South Korea in 2016. Her dissertation offers a comparative analysis of an African American, a Hungarian, and a South Korean novel with a focus on their representation of collective trauma through the narrative mode of magical realism. She has published papers on Korean author Hwang Sok-yong and on Toni Morrison. She has presented conference papers on Korean American writers Nora Okja Keller and Catherine Chung. Currently she teaches at Karinthy Frigyes Bilingual Secondary School in Budapest in its International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme and at Kodolányi János University as a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English Language and Literature. eszter.mohacsi@kodolanyi.hu

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