

The Division System in Sueyeun Juliette Lee's *Underground National**

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I. Introduction

One of the most challenging of contemporary Korean American poets is Sueyeun Juliette Lee. She has also been one of the most prolific, publishing four books in the last ten years: *That Gorgeous Feeling* (2008), *Underground National* (2010), *Solar Maximum* (2015), and *No Comet, That Serpent in the Sky Means Noise* (2017). Her work is challenging in its exploratory form and content, like much recent poetry by Asian American writers who build on the influence of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha and Myung Mi Kim (Yu 819).

Lee, at least in her first two books, writes from the resistant, anti-orientalist position common to most Asian American writers who consider the location of Asian Americans in the U.S. The first book tends toward more domestic U.S.

* This research was supported by a grant from Chonnam National University and a sabbatical residency at Mary Baldwin University.

concerns, while the second has a more transnational focus. Like other recent poetry collections by young Asian American writers, Lee's third and fourth books contain limited direct references to the writer's Asian heritage: none in the third, and few in the fourth. In that respect, like those other poets, she seems to have moved to a more "post-racial" poetic (see, for instance, Monica Youn's three books, which almost never include obvious ethnic content).

In the transnational focus of her second book, Lee locates herself as part of the Korean diaspora affected by Korea's "division system," a system that Korean scholar Paik Nak Chung¹⁾ has contemplated for many years. The very fact of South Korean immigration to the U.S. is a result of the division, whether directly or indirectly. The trauma of division and its subsequent war is passed on to later generation as "postmemory" "by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they [those later generations without direct lived experience of the traumatic event] grew up" (Hirsch 106). Other Korean American poets likewise address their postmemories of division, most notably Suji Kwock Kim in her award-winning 2003 collection, *Notes from the Divided Country*, which has received considerable attention in South Korean scholarship. Ed Bok Lee identifies the trauma of inheriting division when he asks, "did the Korean War save my father's life / or divide it?" (*Real Karaoke People* 25), or when he refers to "The shrapnel [he] inherited / from [his] father's brain" (*Whorled* 81).

Representations of division vary from poet to poet. An adoptee poet like Sun Yung Shin incorporates North/South divisions into her further division from Korean history through adoption, a trauma itself grounded in the war wrought by the imposition of the 38th parallel as dividing line. Shin incorporates division especially in her second and third books, *Rough and Savage* and *Unbearable Splendor*. The

1) In respect for cultural difference, names of Korean scholars are generally given in the Korean style, surname first. Korean American and other western names, or Korean names on western publications, are generally given in the western style, surname last, as they appear on the publications.

effects of division directly influence Cathy Park Hong's poetry when she uses her experience reporting on North Korean refugees in China as a basis for the middle section of her third book, *Engine Empire*. Other poets like Annie Kim (*Into the Cyclorama*) and Mia You (*I, Too, Dislike It*) also include poems of Korea's division into their recent collections.

As part of her poetics of division, Lee challenges Korean expectations for ethnic belonging and behavior, as do other Korean American poets like Hong in *Translating Mo'um* and *Dance Dance Revolution*.²⁾ Those expectations extend to the diaspora and are embedded in the one-blood mythos that remains strong in contemporary Korean society, expectations that sometimes surface in Korean scholars' readings of Korean American literature.³⁾

The division system and challenges to ethnic expectations are most influential in *Underground National*, Lee's second book, throughout which she reflects on and/or incorporates aspects of her Korean heritage. In looking at that pervasive attention to her heritage, I apply Paik's theorization of the "division system" to the aesthetics of Lee's poetry. The division and its postmemorial influence are embedded in Lee's dedication of the book, "For all who've suffered the multi-generational consequences of nation building. May the shape of the future arise from a renewed imagination" (5). Obviously, the nation that was built is Korea, but that nation is actually two, North and South, each of which claims itself as the sole legitimate nation of the Korean people.⁴⁾

2) In another kind of resistance, Hong and Lee found themselves to be allies in a broad opposition to the white domination and unreflective racism of conceptual poetics, an opposition sparked by a re-mix of Michael Brown's autopsy presented as a poem by Kenneth Goldsmith at Brown University in 2015 (Grotjohn, "Hijacking the Type").

3) Perhaps it is necessary to recognize that, just as not every Caucasian-American adheres to orientalist constructs, not every Korean concedes to the hegemony of one-blooded racialism.

4) Article 3 of the South Korean constitution claims sovereignty over the whole peninsula: "The territory of the Republic of Korea shall consist of the Korean peninsula and its adjacent islands" [*Korea (Republic of) 1948 (rev. 1987)*]. Article 1 of the North Korean Constitution claims sovereignty over "all the Korean people" [*Korea (Democratic People's Republic of) 1972 (rev.*

The *two*-nation building of Korea develops into the division system that Paik has theorized. Lee's dedication creates a connection between Korea and its diaspora, as all those people, no matter what country is home for them, are related in being affected by "the multi-generational consequences of nation building." Lee seems to agree with Paik that the future can be considered "as a creative art" (Paik, "Reunification Movement" 207) realized through "renewed imagination." As the diaspora has been claimed as part of the Korean ethnic nation, Korean American poets, too, might become "artists of history" (Paik, "Reunification Movement" 207). Surely Lee takes such a position in her epigraph. The division system is important throughout the book, but it is especially influential in the first two of six poetic sequences that make up the book, "Korea, What is" (9-41) and "Underground National (a priori)" (43-58).⁵

II. Images of Division

In "Korea, What is," the three-part first sequence of *Underground National*, Lee refers directly to "A nomenclature of division" (17). She gives several visual representations of that division, once in a list format created with information taken from the CIA's *World Factbook* website:

total: 120,540 sq km	total: 98,480 sq km	
land: 120,410 sq km	land: 98,190 sq km	
water: 130 sq km	water: 290 sq km	(14) ⁶

[1998].

- 5) The non-standard use of the lower-case in the two titles and the open parenthesis in the second are Lee's.
- 6) Both sets of numbers are slightly different in the most recent update of *The World Factbook*. The current numbers for North Korea are "total: 120,538 sq km / land: 120,408 sq km / water: 130 sq km"; for South Korea, "total: 99,720 sq km / land: 96,920 sq km / water: 2,800 sq km."

The simple form of listing the areas of North (on the left) and South Korea (on the right) separately emphasizes division. The structured lists suggest a systematic approach to visualizing the division. The fact that the lists are taken from a CIA website even hints toward the idea, often expressed by Paik, that the Korean division is part of a neo-liberal world system (“Making the Movement” 7; “South Korean Democracy” 160 & 163; “Toward Overcoming Korea’s Division System” 280). It is not a great leap of the imagination to see the *World Factbook* as a systemic neo-liberal catalogue of the world.

The visual emphasis of Lee’s side-by-side lists echoes the visual emphases in the four images of Korean maps included in her book: one on the cover, and three others that preface the three parts of “Korea, What is.” Two of the maps, with their geopolitical signals, emphasize division, while the two others emphasize the imagination of a unified Korea.

The image on the cover reproduces a topographical satellite image of a section of the DMZ. The area of the DMZ is multi-colored, while the portions of North and South Korea are a drab grayscale. Superimposed on the image is one grid in black and white, apparently longitude and latitude lines, and another larger grid with red lines. The competing and intersecting grids suggest two separate but interdependent ways of organizing perceptions and understandings of the nation. Paik highlights such interdependence when he argues that the two Koreas are locked in “a self-reproducing system” in which the ruling elites of the two nations each “have common vested interests in maintaining division” (“South Korean Democracy” 160).

The image that prefaces the first section of “Korea, What is” (10-25) is a nighttime satellite image of the Korean peninsula. The two Koreas are outlined in white so that the borders are apparent. The remarkable contrast between the two countries is that South Korea is full of light from its cities while North Korea is in almost total darkness. The division between the two Koreas is obvious.

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/kn.html>>; <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ks.html>>.

The image that introduces the second section (26-34) is another black and white satellite image, this one taken during the daytime. This daylight image shows no noticeable division between the two Koreas, nor between Korea and China to the north. Because it is a daylight image, the difference in electrical power is not apparent. This image suggests that the division is somewhat unnatural, as it is not visible: the division system is an imposed ideational structure, as Paik has argued.

The daytime image, in light of the poems it precedes, suggests a wishful desire to transcend division, as is likewise found throughout Paik's work. While the geographical division is not visible on the satellite image, the section itself focuses on South Korea, and the individual poems are frequently created from "borrowed texts" in the fashion of conceptual poetry. Most of those texts come from "blogs, many of them on Korean pop-culture and news" (*Underground National* 104). Paik places his hope for transcending the division system with the people, in "a sustained *movement* of the people of North and South Korea" ("Reunification Movement" 179) in which "common people exercise their initiatives" ("Korean-Style Reunification" 151). Lee looks at that popular imagination as well, although she may not be quite so hopeful as Paik.

The image at the beginning of the third section (35-41) is a replication of a hand-drawn map from the Joseon dynasty. The map refers to a time before division but also to an historical imagination that may not be an accurate representation, just as the dimensions of the map are not geographically accurate. This is the map that both countries might claim, a country before division, in a mythological time of Korean ethnic oneness. Lee notes in the notes that the "image is of Korea when it was known as Choson" (104) (*Joseon* in contemporary Romanization). The atlas containing the map is "held at the Library of Congress" (104) in the U.S., an ally of South Korea. The physical location of the map in the U.S. reminds us of the South Korean national conception, but the location of the name reminds us of the North Korean national conception, since "Choson" (or *Joseon*) is part of North Korea's official name of *Joseon Minjujueui Inmin Gonghoaguk* (조선 민주주의 인민 공화국)

but not of South Korea's name of *Daehanminguk* (대한민국). Just as the second section has a primary focus on South Korea, this third section has a primary focus on North Korea through multiple borrowings from Kim Jong-il's "On Some Questions in Understanding the *Juche* Philosophy" (*Underground National* 105).

Of course, *Juche* is the philosophy of self-reliance, a concept that is undercut by Paik's explanation of the division system upholding both Southern and Northern regimes. In other words, each regime relies on negating the legitimacy of the other in order to advance its own claims of legitimacy. The symbiosis of the system precludes any real independence, Paik suggests. Furthermore, the cartographic inaccuracies of the depicted unified Korea might suggest that a unified Korean populace was never quite a reality, a notation that might trouble Paik's desire to see a unified population as the source for a unified peninsula. Perhaps that myth and desire for unity or sameness is partially based on an illusion, albeit an illusion that might be called an imagined nationality.

In any case, the visual impact of the four map images suggests different ways of understanding the country, complicating the notion of "What is" Korea introduced by the title of the sequence.

III. The Individual in Division

In the second sequence, "Underground National (a priori)" (43-58), Lee continues to employ visual as well as verbal representation to address the historical imagination. That imagination applies to both the idea of the nation and to an individual's place within that idea. The first poem divides into a kind of north and south in its two fairly conventional (for Lee) free-verse stanzas:

WHO said,
into what future, not

an element—
 as a foreigner, hardly, but
 a more disciplinary profusion
 into the imaginary of
 our “nation.”

And that,
 too,
 is underground,
 forced into a complex of
 understandings that
 only come to the fore
implicitly,

(when we avert our eyes (45)

Even the stanza break that falls in the middle of a line mimics the north/south dividing line of the peninsula (the DMZ) in creating a division that angles upward (northward) as it moves to the right across the page (eastward), recalling the maps of the previous sequence. The single-line coda to this poem slips outside the two-stanza north/south structure, but, as a parenthetical comment, it is marginal, not part of the central discourse. It is, in its location beneath the two stanzas and its parenthetical subtextuality, “underground,” perhaps. The content of the coda reinforces the subtextual underground as that which is not clearly seen, or cannot be seen until “we avert our eyes” from the main text, look indirectly or “*implicitly*” for meaning.

Close attention to the language of this poem shows a set of conflicts combined in the “system” of the poem. Just the scare quotes around the word “nation” suggest conflicting meanings between the so-called “nation” in the scare quotes and the nation as it may really be. The so-called “nation” seems to be troubled by “disciplinary profusion”; profusion complicates the idea of a singular nation, as

geopolitical reality casts both North and South Korea's constitutional claims of singular legitimacy into question.

The troubled singularity is of "our 'nation,'" a phrase that, except for the scare quotes, mimics the Korean-language phrase *uri nara* (우리나라). Furthermore, with the reference to being "as a foreigner," which Lee is to Korea, having been born and raised in the U.S., we might expect that the ironizing scare quotes might be placed around "our" rather than "nation." That is not the case, however, and it not being the case suggests the South Korean claim on its diaspora as *dongpo* (동포), overseas family (Jaeeun Kim 236). Lee suggests that, while the ideas of nation may be profuse, it is still *our* nation, even though some of "us" may be foreign to the geographical location. With her reference to "the imaginary of / our 'nation,'" Lee suggests a possible extension of the idea of the nation to the diaspora, something that is, indeed, part of South Korean immigration law with the special immigrant status offered to many members of the diaspora.

But the imaginary cuts at least two ways. The imaginary can be a creative possibility, but it can also be an illusion. The many ways to be disciplined suggested by Lee's phrase "disciplinary profusion" point toward a "complex of understandings" about what the word "our" (우리) might represent. An insider's understanding of that complexity may be nearly impenetrable to foreigners, including Korean Americans who, though they may not be considered *oeguksaram* (외국사람), are still foreigners.⁷⁾

The potential profusion in imagining "our" nation must go "underground," in her first echo of the title's adjective. In other words, some understandings of the nation and who belongs to it and how one belongs to it might best be unspoken,

7) 외국사람 / *oeguksaram* is generally translated as "foreigner," but it could be translated as "outside-country person" or "outside person" or even "outsider," so might be applied ambiguously to overseas Koreans, who are often classified as insiders. Also, however, ambiguously. Diasporic immigrant Koreans in the U.S., for instance, might consider themselves to be foreigners in the U.S. but still refer to native-born Americans of non-Korean heritage as *oeguksaram*

might best “only come to the fore / *implicitly*.” The foregrounding of the implicit might even refer reflexively to a way in which poetry itself might function, as poetry is an art of implication through the suggestiveness of figurative language, a figuration that continues in the visual as well as verbal divisions of Lee’s book.

The third poem, for instance, creates two concrete images of division: first, in the parallel lists that echo the CIA *Factbook* lists of South and North in “Korea, What is,” and, second, in the line that extends across the page:

The “nation” as a furtive
heterogeneity we want
to read as flat

And it casts back
an arbitrary stasis of
“THEN”

that this body (suddenly)

enfolds

<

‘make firm, establish’>

I only wanted what to say to say it

(47)

The line across the page is a visual reinforcement of division that occurs in the tenth and fifteenth poems in this sequence as well. That line functions also as a reminder of what might be “underground” or implicit or secret or even “furtive,” as she hints in this third poem. The line also literalizes, somewhat humorously, the understanding that poetry is often composed of lines. Since her poetry does not often break into conventional lines, that literal use of a line emphasizes her lack of conventional compositional formality.

The first three lines on the left read, as a grammatical noun phrase: “The ‘nation’ as a furtive / heterogeneity we want / to read as flat.” The “heterogeneity”

here suggests the underground profusion of the first poem. Both suggest multiplicity that is perhaps not spoken of, at least not in public discourse. That public discourse is a “flat” reading of the nation, a reading of sameness rather than heterogeneity, a flatness with no sharp stones protruding. That desire for a reading of sameness might be emphasized by the first-person-plural pronoun “we,” recalling the common use of “our” (*uri*) from the first poem in the sequence, a reference to the nation as *uri nara* (our nation). However, here the idea of the nation is also again questioned by the use of scare quotes. These three lines read as a parallel to current arguments about the traditional idea of Korean ethnic homogeneity, arguments that sometimes suggest such homogeneity no longer exists in South Korea.

The flatness in the left-side list leads to the parallel right-side list with a reinforcement of that imagined homogeneity. The nation (“it”) creates a “stasis,” an unchanging sameness that is “arbitrary” or imposed. The stasis suggests a desire to cling to an imagined past of cultural and ethnic purity: an idealized “THEN,” like the time represented by the Joseon era map in the first sequence.

Both the furtive heterogeneity and the arbitrary stasis become part of Lee’s identity, if “this body” to which she refers is her own. The fourteenth poem indicates that she may well refer to her own body here when she refers to herself there as “*An embodied archive of various, contradictory readings of history*” (58).

IV. Insider/Outsider Imagination

The profusions of stasis/singularity and movement/heterogeneity appear several more times in the sequence. In the fourth poem, Lee creates parallel contrasts of “pool” vs “moving flow” and “flicker” vs “steady state glow,” with the pun on “state” reinforcing connections to the nation and nationality:

A hologram projected
 out of the desires
 steeped into this saturation
 of time, which we see as a
 pool rather than a
 moving flow.

(Am I a flicker or a steady state glow,

this form
 which (48)

The pool, in its apparent stillness or physical tangibility, is a visual illusion, a “hologram” that is “projected” from “desires,” and desire exists because of a lack, an absence of fulfillment. That static “THEN” of the third poem does not exist. The second contrast here, between “flicker” and “steady state glow,” takes on an added valence when recalling the first map of “Korea, What is” (10). In that map, the South Korean “state” was a “steady [. . .] glow,” the North but a “flicker.” She does not know which she is, but she should know to which state she belongs, and that state should not be the fragmented “form / which” leads to no resolution, as the final right-isolated couplet has no qualification following the relative pronoun. The form is not clarified or explained, so the promise of the “which” is unfulfilled. Time is not a pool; it is a moving flow.

A few pages later, in the ninth poem, Lee seems to imagine the arbitrary ethnic stasis being extended to the diaspora, at least if the first-person plural “we” as it is used here includes members of the diaspora.

But what the nation speaks, we are required to understand.
 And the speaking ties us to this sinking ground.
 And it isn't stone at all, but made of blood.

Just as I am, just as you are. (53)

That the nation is not made of stone but of blood further suggests the extension of the imagined nation to the diaspora, a nationalism based in a frequent Korean emphasis on pure blood/one blood (순혈/*sunhyeol*), and the final line suggests a shared identity. The first line, however, is problematic, especially in light of Paik's division system in which the two Korean nations, North and South, each claim an authoritative and singular sovereignty over all Koreans. Each nation that speaks requires the Korean who listens to understand that nation's claims for singularity and for determining what it means to be truly Korean, both politically and culturally.

The problematic nature of that requirement is questioned on the very next page, however, as Lee begins the tenth poem with the line, "If I refuse to understand—," turning from the first-person plural to the first-person singular, a turn that underscores the "furtive / heterogeneity" of the third poem by moving from a collective sameness to individual difference. In this tenth poem, as noted, she repeats a visual representation of the underground with a line across the page. Immediately beneath that dividing line, she concludes the poem with this short definition:

In secrecy or hiding. Of or denoting a group movement seeking to explore alternative forms of lifestyle or artistic expression; by a free form injection into prescribed parameters for doubt, for the way the imagination harbors light and stills it. (54)

Those are two definitions of "underground," appropriately located underneath the horizontal, as if "under" the "ground" of the poem. The first definition concludes with the semi-colon and is taken from the OED. The second is created from her own imagination. The two definitions contrast the "required" or prescriptive "understanding" to which Lee refers in the previous poem with the "free / form" refusal to understand to which she refers here. That is, the dictionary prescribes

understanding, while Lee's own creative definition turns from that prescription, although the two definitions are not necessarily opposed. Her choice of "alternative forms" is a "free / form," which becomes self-reflexive when considering Lee's avoidance of prescribed poetic forms in favor of prose form and fragmentation.

Those two definitions of the first word in the title of the sequence—"Underground"—are followed by a definition of the second word—"National"—in the thirteenth poem: "<Of or relating to a 'nation'; common to or characteristic of a whole / nation>" (57). Unlike the dual prescribed and imagined definitions of "underground," this quotation includes only the prescribed dictionary definition of "nation." Once again, Lee reflects how each Korean nation might reserve a particular conservative definition of the nation for itself, while the individual might "explore alternative forms of lifestyle or artistic expression."

Lee concludes the concluding fifteenth poem with another "underground" construction via a line across the page:

And what is this space we live in—

to be one of a multitude

but cutout as well— (59)

The word "cutout" seems to present itself in the syntax as a verb, reiterating a key tension we have observed throughout the sequence. The verb "cutout" is set in a compound relationship with the verb "be," and in that construction, the tension of being both part of a group and separated from it gives a conclusively inconclusive impression. On the other hand, the verb form of "cutout" is not actually a single-word compound; it should be two separate words: "cut out." In that prescriptive case, the word "cutout" must be read as a noun placed in contrast to "one." Is she "one of a multitude" or is she a "cutout," someone separated from the

multitude?

The poetic impact of the word includes yet another possibility, however. An “underground” possibility, one might say. The fourth definition for “cutout” in the OED is a “person acting as a middle-man, esp. in espionage.” The third definition in the online *Merriam-Webster* dictionary might be even more to the point: “an intermediary in a clandestine operation.” While the idea of “espionage” might hint toward underground activity, the quality of being “clandestine” is rooted in the Latin for “secret” or “hidden,” both possible synonyms for “underground,” a connection made explicit in the first sentence of the definition given in the tenth poem: “In secrecy or hiding” (54).

That third possibility for the meaning of “cutout” is an apt metaphor for how Lee positions herself in this sequence, and perhaps throughout the book, as the title of the book excerpts the title of the poem. She is the middle-person, the intermediary passing on to the reader a situation of being both inside and outside the discourses of Korean nationality.

V. Conclusion

“Korea, What is” seems to be embedded in the division system in its interrogation of what the nation “is” for a Korean American. Paik’s ideas may be less helpful in considering “Underground National (a priori.” While Paik sees the possibility of people from both North and South, as well as in the diaspora, uniting in opposition to the ruling powers of North and South to overcome division, Lee presents herself as often isolated from the idea of a unified people. That is, Lee’s unwillingness or inability to conform to static notions of nation and nationality seems to trouble Paik’s hope for a unified people.

Indeed, lack of unity seems to be a fairly accurate means of understanding contemporary Korean attitudes, at least those of South Koreans. Many of those

ordinary folk whom Paik sees as the means of transcending division might in truth reinforce that division in their attitudes. While the evidence is mixed, several recent studies and reports have suggested that many South Koreans, especially younger people for whom a unified Korea belongs to a distant historical past, to a world that ended several generations before their birth, no longer view North Korean refugees or even *Joseonjok* (Korean Chinese) as parts of the nation, as belonging to *uri nara* (Campbell; Denny; Ha and Jang; Jaeeun Kim; Jiyeon Kim *et al*; Seol and Skrentny). Indeed, Kim Sung Kyung locates North Korean refugees as part of “the question of multiculturalism” in South Korea (69).

Many of the people in whom Paik invests his hopes seem increasingly disinclined to embrace immigrant ethnic Koreans or reunification as time goes by. Yet, in these growing divisions between South Koreans and overseas or other-national Koreans, Paik’s formulations give a perhaps paradoxical hope (and paradox is never far from Paik’s formulations).

A key paradox in Paik’s hoped-for future is that the only path to overcoming division goes through embracing division. Paik has often insisted that a prerequisite to reunification must be mutual agreement by the North and the South of one another’s right to exist. He insists that “the only realistic course” is through recognizing “two sovereign states” (“Toward Overcoming Korea’s Division System” 286). In that two-state solution, Paik participates in the broader argument for a “peace regime” that must precede and take precedence over the desire for unification (see, for instance Han Yong-sup, Lee Byung Soo, and the collection edited by Joo and Kwack, among many others). For Paik, eventual reunification is contingent upon a peace treaty, not just an armistice, bringing the Korean War, finally, to an end. He wants both countries to abandon their claims to sovereignty over the whole peninsula and recognize the other as a separate and legitimate state.

Paik’s proposed mutually-recognized dual sovereignty suggests how overseas Koreans and their other-ethnic allies already are supporting eventual reunification along the path Paik has charted. The National Campaign to End the Korean War, an

organization based in the U.S. and supported by both American *dongpo* and their other-ethnic allies, follows the South Korean calls for a peace regime “by replacing the outdated Armistice Agreement with a peace treaty/agreement” (National Campaign).

If the populace is to shape the future, and if that populace includes not only the diaspora, but the many residents of South Korea who are not ethnically Korean, then “the shape of the future” to which Lee refers in her dedication *must* “arise from a renewed imagination” (5) that expands its borders to include the “furtive / heterogeneity” of “Underground National (a priori)” (47). As Lee Byung-soo has recognized, South Korean multiculturalism has become part of the “complex community” that must now build on “the perspective of peace-priority” (338-39, 351-52). The problematic nature of Korea’s institutionalized multicultural policies has suggested to many that the crossing over to South Korean identity is determined more by official attempts at assimilation than at openness (Kang, Lim, and Watson). The same might be true of the acceptance of overseas Koreans, and it is at times true of the reception of Korean American writers: they are considered for the ways in which they conform to or are seen as desiring to conform to ideas of Koreanness (see, for instance, Jeong Jong-jin, Kim Jong-hoi, and Lee Kun Jong, as well as Grotjohn, “Recognizing Korean American Poets”).

Paik, however, has argued that “if one may speak of a community of Koreans that includes ethnic Koreans all over the world, it must already be a multinational community. It is also a multilingual community” (“Possibility and Significance” 100). If that community and its other-ethnic allies like the supporters of the National Campaign to End the Korean War and non-ethnic-Korean residents of Korea are to help, in however small a way, achieve some sort of unification or peace regime, that achievement may have to come through the recognition of diversity. Just as the path to national unification must come through the acceptance of division, perhaps the path to popular unification must come through the acceptance of diversity. Popular unity may have to come not through the conformity of enforced assimilation but

through the effort to modify static notions of the nation to include those who refuse to understand, in their underground way, what such static notions require of them.

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| Abstract |

The Division System in Sueyeun Juliette Lee's *Underground National*

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This essay uses Paik Nak Chung's theorization of the Korean "division system" to read *Underground National*, the second collection by Korean American poet Sueyeun Juliette Lee. Paik's theorization of the key "division" being between the governments, on the one hand, and the general populace of North and South together, on the other, is a useful frame for Lee's exploratory poetics. The visual images reproduced in "Korea, What is," the first poetic sequence in the book, resonate with the written text to show how division is imagined by a nation that clings to idealized memories of a unified past. In the second sequence, "Underground National (a priori)," Lee continues her images of division, adding to the North-South division a division between herself as a Korean American and the requirement for ethnic unity sometimes enforced by both Korean nations. Just as Paik insists that national unification can come only through the acceptance of division, Lee suggests that unification of various Korean peoples, diasporic and domestic, may come only through the acceptance of diversity.

▶ Key Words: Sueyeun Juliette Lee, Paik Nak Chung, *Underground National*, poetry, division system, Korean American

논문투고일: 2017년 7월 20일

심사완료일: 2017년 8월 18일

게재확정일: 2017년 8월 30일