

Ontologies of Otherness

By Vivien Lee

Vivien Lee is a Korean American writer from South Korea and Virginia. An undercurrent in her work lies in lyrical connections drawn upon poetics, philosophy, meaning-making and memory. From a young age she was raised by her grandparents, a television actress and screenwriter in Seoul who first influenced her interest in art and prose. Her writings have appeared in New York Magazine, Observer, Document Journal, SSENSE, Hazlitt, PIN-UP, Nylon, and elsewhere. She is currently based in Manhattan, New York.

When I moved to Seoul in 2019, it marked a twenty-year homecoming. I came back to my father's homeland not as a Korean but a *gyopo*, the name for us westernized sojourners, distinctively set apart from locals thanks to our loud tattoos and poor Korean speaking skills. Living in diaspora, you arrive everywhere hollow. Sometimes you grow roots; other times you remain a ghost without a shape to easily define. This was the year and place I'd learn I was bisexual, and that to be foreign is also to be queer, fluid in the way one constantly changes with their milieu. Especially in Korea, where they will bulldoze sleek condos and fast fashion brands over the wooden *hanok* their mothers grew up in, but conservative types will do anything to preserve what they consider the most fundamental cornerstones of their identity: being Christian and heterosexual. The patriarchal upholding of the nuclear family and nationalism confronts you at all times even in the most innocent of cloaks, like trendy cascades of matching couples outfits—inspirational ads for the newlywed life.

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It was a hot and humid July and I had just moved for a job at a nightclub in Itaewon, a neighborhood north of the Han River, colored by rooftop terraces waving laundry like flags. Itaewon is the one place brimming with illegal mezcal, underground house music, and falafel made by Middle Eastern vendors who—you'll come to find—speak better Korean than you.

Itaewon had originally been a town for Buddhist monks, named after pregnant nuns who gave birth to the village people after they were raped by Japanese soldiers in the 1500s. It was men in uniforms, stationed army workers, that helped Itaewon flourish into an alluring district for tourists—a former sin city of prostitutes and sex parlors now replaced by late night *pocha* and soda-stained dance floors. The dance floor has always been the escapist's playground, a liberated zone where, for a brief moment, power structures collapse and one can get a glimpse of utopia. For this reason Itaewon has also become a haven, with its Muslim-owned delis and Ethiopian pool bars, for Seoul's diverse misfits —party loving gyopos, immigrants, and the LGBTQ community.

Part of these stomping grounds earned the nickname “Homo Hill”, a village not too far from the nightclub where I was working. Homo Hill was home to infamous drag venues like Trunk, an asylum for sexual minorities in a country where transgender and LGBTQ rights are hardly, if ever, protected.

Working in nightlife as a single female *gyopo*, you experience unique discriminations of your own. I never thought I’d experience the level of misogyny that I did in Seoul. Koreans use appearance like it’s currency where men treat you according to how you look, influencing everything from your chances at gainful employment to housing security. A 2017 poll in South Korea found that nearly 40 percent of participants experienced discrimination based on their appearance while applying for jobs, which would ask for their photos, weight, and height. Being a short, petite female with a face unmarked by plastic surgery, I had to assert myself into my role as a woman more diligently, performing to keep up with the sexy, seductiveness that the world of nightlife demanded of me. The crux of positive illusions. When I wasn’t taking drink orders, I was often cleaning up vomit, yelling at people to put their cigarette out, or being yelled at, if not harassed. Korean men were so confused by my disinterest in flirting with them that a customer once asked if I was a lesbian. It didn’t matter if I was or not—what struck me in that moment was that my lack of gender performance made me queer in the eyes of this man.

Much of the culture’s fixation on male approval is the political aftermath of WWII, beauty beholden to the eyes of the colonizer; U.S. doctors began importing cosmetic surgery techniques throughout and after the Korean War. The ideology behind the trend is called *gwansang*, a conviction in “fixed destiny” yielding to Euro-American notions that it’s possible to change one’s fate by changing their face. This consumption of beauty and its pressures are a challenge for those pushing many of the country’s women’s rights today. Korea had seen a wave of feminists starting a movement called "Escape the Corset" shortly after #metoo, where women would record themselves online shaving their heads and denouncing Korea’s multi-billionaire beauty industry. But most of the women, considered extremists by the mainstream public whose beliefs interfere with their ideals, end up as martyrs, in one way or another. There are activists who have been fired from their jobs, assaulted on the streets, and have endured stigmatization to the point of fearing for their safety.

I often think of how haunted South Korea sometimes feels, having lost many of its citizens for reasons ranging from military war games and colonization to suicides due to social ridicule. To be marginalized is to be a ghost. You exist but no one can hear or see you. And if they do, the masses are usually terrified of you. I think of stories like that of Byun Hee-Soo, South Korea’s first transgender soldier whose only dream was to serve for her country. Yet when the Defense Ministry deemed her “physically and mentally handicapped because of her lack of male sexual organs” after undergoing gender reassignment, she was unlawfully forced to discharge. During an emotional press briefing when Byun appealed for reinstatement, tears ran down her face as

she publicly pleaded, *"I want to show everyone that I can be a great soldier. Please give me that chance."* Betrayed, Byun took her own life on March 3rd, 2021.

The year before Byun's case appeared, Korean lawmakers submitted an amendment to remove "sexual orientation" from the NHRCK mandate listing categories of discriminatory acts violating equal rights. Same-sex activity between adults continues to be criminalized in the military, and same-sex marriage is still not recognized. At the beginning of the pandemic, the LGBTQ community faced nationwide ostracism after an outbreak was traced back to a someone who had visited a gay club in Itaewon. Right-wing newspapers, funded by conservative Christian churches like Kukmin Ilbo, labeled gay foreigners as unsafe and prone to risky behavior, rousing homophobic and xenophobic discourse. My expat friends in Seoul would tell me they were afraid to get tested for COVID-19 for fear of being outed.

While a new anti-discrimination bill was presented a month after, conservative lawmakers in South Korea have continued to block its passage. A few months after the Itaewon outbreak, my friend Mary wrote to me, needing recommendations of temporary safe housing for LGBTQ folks in Korea. A friend of hers was suffering emotional abuse from their parents and looking to flee their own family home. Upon some scouting and referrals, we had found an LGBTQ-friendly hostel that was foreign-run and based in Itaewon. Unlike Byun Hee-Soo, who had committed suicide due to lack of institutional support, Mary's friend had been able to find a community to guide them through their isolated struggle. Sometimes I wonder if this is what it means to save a life.

If politicians and lawmakers provided institutional protection for these communities, perhaps more deaths could be prevented. But, for now, protection comes within our informal structures—party collectives and performers pioneering for a *rave new world*, all armed in leather-clad uniforms.

I have since moved back to America. Here, with the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes, I have realized again that racial otherness and queerness can push you to similar peripheries. No one knows this better than the Black and Brown trans community in America. They know what it means to live in fear, but they also know what it means to live and govern in love. I think how much of the nightlife scenes and dance music culture I've identified with is owed to the drag community; those who learn to move through life carving joy, despite everything stacked against them.

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Every now and then I recall my first week arriving in Seoul. My coworker who lived a few doors down from my flat showed up to a meeting one morning pale and distraught, looking like he

hadn't slept. His neighbor had jumped off the roof and killed himself the night before. That week, there were a series of two other suicides in the neighborhood. One was by a business owner who was struggling with debt and a divorce. Another was a gay man, suspected to be lonely from living alone into his old age without a partner.

Three miles from my neighborhood, by the Han River on Mapo Bridge, there had been hotline booths and handrail notes with sentiments like *you are a good person* installed, a citywide program to dissuade anyone from jumping to their deaths—the average rate the year I was there had been 38 suicides per day. Both were eventually taken down, the irony being that the mayor who had written one of the messages later killed himself.

Compared to other countries, the suicide rate in Korea is greater among young women, a result of the country's lack of mental health care. Women have long been conditioned to blame themselves for any discrimination they encounter, and the self-hatred that often results inevitably becomes too much. I think back to my time working behind a bar, the blatant misogyny that is directed at you so casually—how as a woman, the idea of not fitting in is akin to being queer and other, to being stigmatized and ignored.

There would be nights I'd go by Mapo Bridge to eat ice cream, my pores filled with sweat beads from the summer heat. I'd gaze out towards the edge of the water and find one, sometimes two large rescue boats that were on standby, ready to dispatch if they saw someone plunge. Their submarine sized spotlights danced around the pillars of steel and concrete, like a big yellow hand trying to catch an ant on the wall. The sweat on my back suddenly felt like ice. *It's all water under the bridge*, I'd think to myself, looking at the waves, how they move forward only to regress backwards, yet remain soft even when they break. In the end, when the common enemy is the steel-cut brutality of institutionalism, perhaps it is in softness where we can find our freedom. Even if traces of Korea's *hanoks*, our mother tongue, or our fundamental otherness were forced to disappear, we fill that space with something else, remaining ever-malleable and fluid like water.