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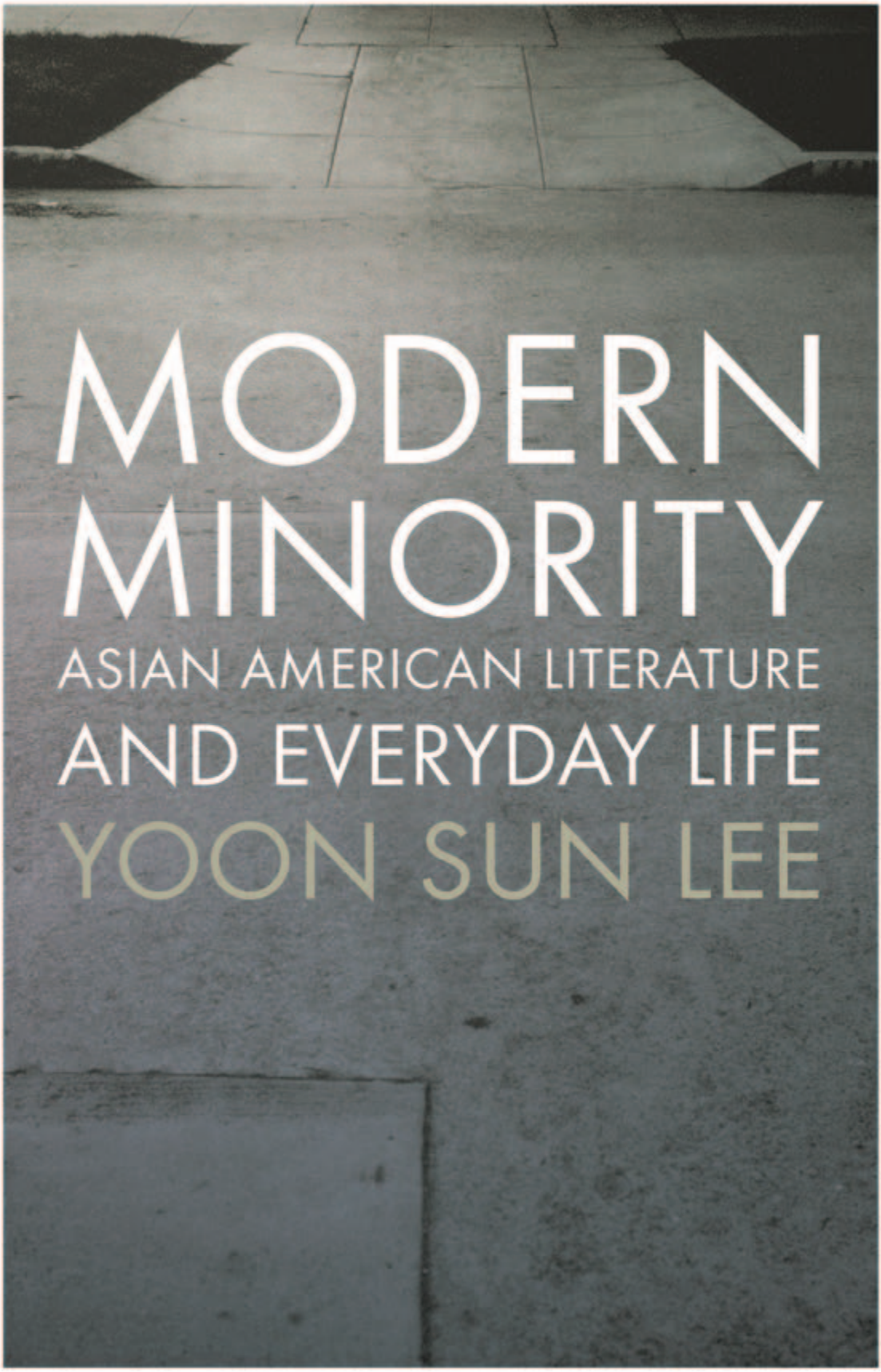
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MODERN
MINORITY
ASIAN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND EVERYDAY LIFE
YOON SUN LEE

{ 1 }

The Outward Spiral: Why Kang and Bulosan Ignore the Everyday

The desire for a new time propels both Younghill Kang and Carlos Bulosan. The Korean-born Kang arrives in America in 1921 at the age of eighteen to pursue his life in the West; seventeen-year-old Bulosan arrives nine years later from the Philippines, a U.S. territory.[1] Both writers conceive of modernity as the limitless development of the new. In *America is in the Heart* (1946), Bulosan gives as his reason for leaving the Philippines, "my life there was too small to float the vessel of my desires."[2] His initial encounter with modernity had predated his arrival in the United States; in Baguio, a resort town frequented by Western tourists, the young Bulosan first notes the vast, uneven temporality and seductive materiality that characterize this condition. "The roads [of Baguio] are asphalt and the most modern and beautiful in the Philippines . . . In the center of the city is a lake strung with multicolored light bulbs that sparkle at night . . . And farther down . . . is the public market, teeming with European and American tourists" (66). Here he learns how to make a little money. "Whenever I saw a white person in the market with a camera, I made myself conspicuously ugly, hoping to earn ten centavos. But what interested the tourists most were the naked Igorot women and their children . . . and robust mountain men whose genitals were nearly exposed" (67).[3] Even more than the aesthetic beauty of the modern, with its smoothness, sparkle, and multiplicity, it is this act of photographing the "native" that reveals the unauthorized self-assertion of modernity. In *East Goes West* (1937), Kang similarly finds in his first sight of New York City this illegitimate grandeur: "the city rose, like a dream dreamed overnight, new, remorselessly new . . . a city of Babel towers, casually, easily strewn end up against the skies . . . this gigantic rebellion which was New York."[4] In their conception, modernity negates boundaries and refuses minorness of all kinds. Kang and Bulosan imagine it to consist in a self-fulfilling time, a newly docile materiality, and expanded relations between people and things. Yet they also dream of finding in it a home, as Bulosan remarks on first viewing the Seattle harbor: "I knew that I must find a home in this new land" (99).

The concept of epic, a traditional aesthetic form of grandness, can help explain what these authors are trying to attain. The dichotomy of epic and novel has often been invoked to define the concept of modernity, with the epic standing for an earlier, irrevocably lost epoch, and the novel representing the modern condition.[5] But for Kang and Bulosan, epic is the mode through which they might capture the essence of modernity and their own relation to it. The account of epic found in Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel*, first drafted in 1914–1915, describes what they hope to find in America: a world "wide and yet . . . like a home, new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own."[6] Approaching Seattle, Bulosan sees the shoreline as "native and promising . . . like coming home after a long voyage, although I had no home" (99). The land strikes him as both "familiar" and "new" (99), in precisely the configuration that Lukács saw as no longer possible in the modern condition of disintegration. Kang, too, dreams of finding in the West "the presence of meaning," and anticipates modernity as the state in which "every action is only a well-fitting garment for the world" (TN, 30). The aspirations of Kang and Bulosan, so different from Lukács's pessimistic appraisal of modernity, can be linked to their postcolonial status, as I will discuss below. Here, I want to suggest that both writers attempt to create in their works this epic condition of integrated vastness, of a world held together by the immanence of meaning. Both of their narratives are structured as continuous trajectories in which each step, twist, and turn marks a movement forward and upward, in which every return is weighted by necessity and full of significance. Dialectic in their narratives exists as the maximal form of emplotment.

In a recent study, Fredric Jameson defines dialectical thought as that which opposes and dismantles "the ideologies of daily life" or "common sense." The latter relies on a "belief in solid concepts, on the one hand, and the certainty of real things, on the other."[7] The dialectic, in contrast, doesn't allow any single idea or thing to stand by itself, or even in stable, permanent opposition to another. It insists on interrelationship, interdependence, and continual change—"the interpenetration of opposites" and "the negation of the negation," in Engels's terms.[8] Apparent opposites start to look alike; that which negates will itself be negated. The dialectic begins by assuming totality, rather than seeing it as an end point.[9] The classic example of nondialectical thinking is what Marx calls the fetishism of the commodity, in which "the products of men's hands," instead of revealing social interdependence or mutuality, seem to possess "a life of their own."[10] The tendency of the capitalist everyday is to see things as unrelated, standing next to each other, or over against each other, while the dialectic insists on pulling relatedness out of apparently disparate things. Kang and Bulosan try to represent the material unfolding of a totality in their narratives. Their aim is to make every place, person, and encounter in America appear to cancel and preserve a prior, more limited version of itself. The narrator, too, successively negates more limited versions of the self only to discover that it was always already part of a larger whole.

The form of recurrence seems intended to embody this dialectical movement. Bulosan's narrative moves continually up and down the West Coast. A typical chapter begins, "I stopped in San Fernando," then a few pages later, "I arrived in Bakersfield," then "I arrived in Stockton during a strike" (271–275); from Stockton he goes to Oakland, then onward, yet again, to San Francisco: "San Francisco was glowing, and behind us Oakland was fading" (280–281). As he continually announces his arrival in the same cities, the same streets and restaurants, he tries to suggest a coming together of places, and of destinies. When he hears the foghorns in San Francisco Bay toward the end of his story, he is reminded of "carabaos lost in a wide meadow" and dreams of his childhood home in Luzon (281). His movements, though at first determined by the availability of work, are eventually shaped by the political and social projects in which he finds his vocation. But what is supposed to represent a spiraling movement ends up looking like a ceaseless, unmappable, haphazard scramble. When Bulosan describes his wanderings, the effect produced is one of disarray rather than destiny. It's one escape, one arrival after another, with no continuous direction or even consistent rhythm. Only twenty pages from the end of the book, Bulosan remarks, "It was the same life all over again. None of us was employed" (300). Nothing seems to change, and the narrator seems trapped in an eternally repeating confusion.

Kang's narrator, eighteen-year-old Chungpa Han, continually spirals around New York, arriving in a different sense each time. When he first steps off the boat from Korea, he takes a dramatic oath in Battery Park: "I swore . . . I must get to know the West" (7)—New York is the mysterious object to be known. But at the end of the first volume he departs, having discovered only the unknowability of the city and of himself:

> New York . . . was shot through and through with vague intimations of fabulous, delicate worlds beyond my bounds of thought, of life reaching out and up in a scope unrestricted, north and south . . . east, west . . . life coiling and spiralling . . . But . . . I came away with no gain, except some poor Korean friends who had pulled me out of an outcast's starvation. (87)

Chungpa's progress, or lack of progress, is measurable through his changing relation to the city's rhythms, but these rhythms themselves never change. At the end of the novel, he returns to find a girl. "All the annoying world of dollars and cents seemed to have been halted for my Sunday afternoon. But my feet still kept time on the pavements to the rhythm of the els" (305). This mechanical rhythm is what he tries to avoid noticing. Neither Kang nor Bulosan fully acknowledge the seriality and schematism of the everyday even though they show it all around them, constituting their world and to a large extent shaping their actions. As a result, Kang's novel is haunted by images of the everyday, by the distant presence of "the Dearborn assembly plants . . . dry, mechanical, tedious" (160). Its nightmare is the assembly line, in which you see the same single part go by you an infinite number of times.

Dialectical repetition deepens and expands; but everyday recurrence is just the same thing over and over, never going anywhere.

The latter is what reveals itself: "a reality that is heterogeneous in itself and meaningless to the individual" (TN, 80). In a sense, *America is in the Heart* and *East Goes West* are novels in spite of themselves, showing and disavowing modernity's everyday as "the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life" (TN, 71).[11] When Chungpa enters a diner to have his first American meal, he makes this friendly gesture to the counterman, whose name is MacNeil:

> I asked him, did he know "MacFlecknoe," an English poem which I had learned in Korea. "Who?" [the man replies] And I quoted: "All human things are subject to decay: / And when Fate summons, monarchs must obey . . ." "Unhuh—that's fine," he said sceptically, with a wink at the girl. "And who's that other Mac, the son-of-a-bitch?" (15)

The splendid closure of Dryden's heroic couplet and its epic scale of vision (even if ironic and nostalgic) offer a grotesque contrast with the world inhabited by MacNeil and his previous customer, a taxi driver who glumly observes, "Third breakfast this morning . . . First one at four, second at six . . . Been up all night" (14). This is modernity's everyday: one breakfast after another, one MacNeil next to "that other Mac," the world of immigration, monopoly capitalism, empty time, and the deskilling of labor. Chungpa tries to ignore this everyday world as long as he can. For him, the counterman is "touched . . . with the magic of the city" (16), a potential Virgil-like guide, and the flophouse where Chungpa spends his second night in America is epic, rather than everyday, in its degradation: like Milton's fallen angels, "Men lay thickly on the floor" (20–21). But as he travels up and down the East Coast working a variety of minor and always temporary jobs, Kang's narrator shows us a life of constant, small-scale economic desperation, the life described by H. T. Tsiang as an endless exchange of functionally equivalent units.[12] The same holds true of Bulosan, whose work, ranging from the canneries of Alaska to the fields of Southern California, also presents itself as "a planless life, hopeless, and without direction . . . merely living from day to day" (169). Both Kang and Bulosan show how the modern everyday emerges through the disappointed hopes of transcendence, unity, and identity with others. The remarkable persistence of these ideals allows them to reveal the everyday's confusing, repetitive tangle.

These works are novels of the everyday in spite of themselves, with a doubleness of form that reflects the complexity of the writers' historical situations. The aspiration to epic integration seems to derive from the postcolonial dimension of their writing. Insofar as they write as Asians about life in America, they encounter a novelistic world that stubbornly resists any attempt to integrate its pieces with each other or with an idea. But in a final dialectical twist, their presentation of the external, everyday world of American modernity ends up attaining an epic immanence because of the radical discrimination of the color line. Neither Kang nor

Bulosan could become a U.S. citizen because of his race. Even though their racial classification as Asians could be uncertain—Kang sees himself as "outside the two sharp worlds of color in the American environment" (273)—the existence of the "invisible wall" (223) of race can never be in doubt. It is the objective link between "the nameless foreigner, the homeless refugee . . . the black body dangling on a tree" (AH, 189).[13] The external world negates the humanity of entire groups that include Kang and Bulosan, and this very negation paradoxically saturates their worlds with meaning. Every space, whether private or public, every action, whether voluntary or forced, acknowledges the significance of race. But in the end, the everyday goes on, trivializing even horror itself, as their works show with remarkable candor. Modernity's everyday appears as a persistent puzzle, as a failure to sustain sublimity, as failure to progress, and failure to cohere.

Small Worlds

Kang and Bulosan attribute the shapes of their lives to an unfolding totality that wears the appearance overseas of colonization. Both writers belonged to nations that no longer officially existed. Korea had been officially annexed by Japan in 1910; the Philippines became U.S. territory in 1898.[14] Both describe empire not as the domination of one nation over another but as the global expansion of modern capitalism.[15] A long history of "global vandalism" (47), as Bulosan puts it, propels the protagonists toward America.[16] In their eyes, colonization reveals how events, persons, and structures separated by space and time are in fact concretely interconnected and full of meaning. Notably, though, neither looks to anticolonial nationalism to reverse this process. Instead of asserting the right of the particular unit to determine its own identity, they affirm their commitment to the universal. Both see themselves as belonging to something larger—ultimately, to modernity itself, understood as a material and a cultural condition. In Bulosan's case, Popular Front socialism offers a political language to articulate his belonging. Close to the end of his narrative, he discovers with fellow labor activists that "[t]here was the same thing in each of them that possessed me: their common faith in the working man . . . it came to me that we were all fighting against one enemy: *Fascism*. It was in every word and gesture, every thought" (311, original emphasis). As in Lukács's epic world, thought, gesture, and people are one.

This unity, which Bulosan finds in the labor movement and Kang in romantic love, aspires to recapitulate a primal unity that both locate in the precolonial past of their countries of origin. Both authors balance their accounts of life in America with equally detailed accounts of the worlds they knew before emigration. In the first part of his book, Bulosan gives lucid, lyrical renderings of rural life at a particular moment in the history of the Philippines. He attributes his family's struggles to the consolidation of power and property rights in a narrow segment of society (the landed gentry and the church), and the extension of American

schooling and emigration to the "U.S. nationals" (not citizens) that Filipinos became.[17] Kang devotes an entire book to the first part of his life in Korea. That book, *The Grass Roof*, published by Scribner in 1931, uses Kang's childhood and education in order to recount the history of a colonized nation. *East Goes West* opens with "the disjointing of a world," the ending of Korean monarchy by Japanese colonialism.[18]

Instead of asserting national independence, however, both Kang and Bulosan want to move away from narrow identification with one nation or one "strip of land" toward an ideal that is modern and universal. Kang's original Korean village is "ruled by national ideals which had been handed down from father to son for innumerable generations" (5). Bulosan's narrator, in the early part of *America*, identifies himself wholly with "this narrow strip of land . . . my soil . . . and my father's faith . . . his love for the earth where his parents and their parents before him had lacerated their lives digging away the stones and trees to make the forest land of our village a fragrant and livable place" (76). But this homogeneous and single-minded attachment to the past makes the narrator into a problematic individual. The narrator of *The Grass Roof*, the same Chungpa Han, presents himself as Lukács's novelistic hero, troubled by an incommensurable interiority. Introduced to Western learning, he claims that "[t]he contrast of my inner world—an expanding cosmos that would admit no boundary—and my outer, that secluded village of the Han, with roots many centuries deep . . . stimulated me to speculate and to speculate, and still I lived as in . . . starvation for more" (183). Precolonial Korea is "bound together it seemed, by invisible, indivisible unity," but it is "unreal like a mystic's dream" (165) because it is isolated from the larger movement of history. Both the natural unity of Korean tradition and the peasant's organic attachment to the soil are unreal to Kang and Bulosan because they fail to acknowledge the dialectical movement of history.