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Reimagining Learning: Resisting Assimilation and Racist Education

Erica Lee

When traditional forms of education are not provided to marginalized communities and the education provided is mediated through white supremacist logic, communities at the margins often push back and create space for their own knowledge production. In the text, *Quiet Odyssey: A Pioneer Korean Woman in America*, Mary Paik Lee and her family show how a Korean immigrant family does exactly this. In collaboration with scholar Sucheng Chan, Mary Paik Lee shares the history and life of her family. Paik Lee's autobiography illuminates to readers a period of time when records and experiences of the first wave of Asian immigrants into the United States were poorly kept. In addition to sharing her struggles as a poor, Asian female, Mary Paik Lee's story depicts her family's migrations through numerous cities and towns in California in search of food, jobs, and the hope of surviving in the United States. Due to exclusionary laws, anti-Asian sentiments, and the exploitation of Asian immigrant labor, an American education was not afforded equally to Asian immigrants. I argue that Mary Paik Lee's family, as exploited Asian laborers, were denied full access to a formal education, disrupting the notion of the "American Dream" that equal opportunity is afforded to all immigrants. Instead, they found alternative means for learning that did not require the educational system as well as found modes of resistance within the racist, white supremacist institution.

Asian immigrants arrived to the United States to supply the demand for cheap labor on plantations, railroads, mines, factories, canneries, and farms. However, unlike other white immigrants, Asian immigrants were viewed and treated as "forever foreigners." The genealogy of this racist construction of Asians as "forever foreigners" can be traced to the Naturalization Act of 1790, which only allowed U.S. citizenship to "whites," and the Naturalization Act of 1870, which extended this to allow for the naturalization of people of African descent, but not that of any

other non-white peoples like Asians (Hu Pegues). The low-wage labor market was already segregated and Asian laborers were paid less than white workers. Using a "dual-wage system," employers kept wages down, which added to tensions and hostilities between whites and the "forever foreign" Asian laborers. This caused white working class laborers to continually call for the "restriction of Asian workers already in a segregated labor market and the exclusion of future Asian immigrants" (Takaki 13). Because of their racialization as "non-white" in a white supremacist state, Asians were faced with racist institutional policies¹ that further marginalized them in both economic and social spheres of U.S. society. The construction of the racialization of Asians is important to consider in understanding why Mary Paik Lee and her family's resistance to and undermining of the dominant racist educational system is profound. I hope to show how Mary Paik Lee and her family's resistances are a powerful testament to the ways Asian Americans and Asian immigrants have been fighting against ideas of assimilation and the myth of the "American Dream."

As perpetually toiling Asian workers, Paik Lee's parents and brother were restricted from receiving a formal education. For example, near the end of her autobiography, Paik Lee states, "we

¹ For instance, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers' immigration to the United States. The National Origins Act of 1924 banned the immigration of Japanese people to the U.S. while "permitting the annual entry of 17,853 from Ireland, 5,802 from Italy, and 6,524 from Poland." The Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934 granted independence to the Philippines, but also worked to limit the annual immigration of Filipinos to fifty (Takaki 14). In addition, during World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into effect Executive Order 9066. This Executive Order incarcerated Japanese Americans in internment camps unlike German or Italian Americans. Despite two-thirds of the 120,000 Japanese internees being American citizens by birth (15).

looked around at our friends in Los Angeles, we could see the progress our people had made since 1906□ Although not being able to speak English was a big problem, after long hours of hard labor, no one had the time or energy to study English” (103). This passage unsettles the notion of the “American Dream” that equal opportunity is afforded to all. Asian immigrants were restricted from a formal education because as exploited bodies, they simply had no “time,” “energy,” or the luxury to study and learn English. In addition, due to inhaling poisonous fumes from work, her father’s health deteriorates and he needs help supporting the family. Paik Lee states, “there was work for Meung [Paik Lee’s older brother], repairing roads and cleaning up the work areas” (43). Asian immigrant laborers were often found working under harsh conditions to earn meager wages for survival, which quickly ruined their bodies. Since work in the public sphere is gendered as “masculine,” boys, like Meung, were forced into the labor market as cheap sources of labor, like their fathers. This caused boys to often be excluded from the formal educational system.

Mary Paik Lee’s poor laboring Korean immigrant parents found reimagined ways of education for their children through informal means. For instance, Paik Lee’s parents provide her education through dialogue, despite their hard lives. She states how her mother made “time to sit down to talk to us once in a while” and began sharing the tragic events that followed after their family’s departure from Korea. Her mother teaches her of Japan colonizing Korea and stripping Koreans of their language, culture, and rights through different means of control and oppression (42). In addition to learning the history of Korea from her mother, her father makes a concerted effort to teach all his children the Korean language. She states, “Meung and I were first taught to read and write in Korean. Father was still trying to do the impossible. Because of his tireless efforts, all the children could speak our language just enough to get by with their elders” (80). Even as overworked, poor Asian laborers

barely earning enough to survive, Paik Lee shares how her father resisted assimilationist ideas by teaching his children the Korean language.

Mary Paik Lee’s parents understood the importance of sharing their history and language with their children. Their efforts of instilling such knowledge gave their children tools to resist white supremacist “education” by rooting them firmly in their own history. Thus, when Mary Paik Lee is confronted with racist, anti-Asian teachings in her history class, she is able to resist this “education.” Her history teacher uses racist and derogatory language towards the Chinese and Japanese as well as derisively saying to her that “Korea was a wild, savage country that had been civilized” by the Japanese (56). She stands up to his teaching by calling him out as ignorant, by demanding, “Where did you learn Asian history? You don’t know a thing about the subject” (56). Mary Paik Lee is able to do so because her family has been educating her through informal spheres that do not require the racist U.S. educational system. Moreover, Paik Lee is able to resist white supremacist teaching within the dominant institution of education because of her parents’ teaching.

In conclusion, as Asian immigrant laborers, Mary Paik Lee’s family is excluded and restricted by the white supremacist educational system. Yet, through informal means, her family educates their children of Korean history and language so they have tools for resistance. Their story unsettles the “American Dream” in different ways. Their experience shows how not all immigrants are afforded equal opportunities and disrupts the notion that all immigrants desire assimilation. Even as poor Asian laborers with little time or energy, they work strenuously to make their children conscious and proud of their Korean identity. Her family’s efforts show the pivotal nature of learning that is unmediated through a form of state control, like the normative American education system. Mary Paik Lee shows ways in which understanding your own history can allow for resistance against white supremacist logic that tells the story of the oppressors. By understanding the history of one’s

own family, there is a great and beautiful resistance to the U.S. education system that deems some as “educated” and others as “uneducated” while making certain histories invisible and visible. Rather, Mary Paik Lee’s poor, Korean immigrant laboring family shows how education occurs not only in a formal institution but in dialogue between individuals who are, themselves, producers of knowledge.

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