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I am not a “Koreaboo”

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I Am Not a “Koreaboo”

Koreaboo /ko ree ah boo/ noun:

Someone who denounced their own race and calls themselves Korean, genuinely believes that they're Korean or wishes they were Korean... They may use small parts of Korean in their sentences without caring about learning the language. They could think that all Asians/Koreans are beautiful gods who are above the human race.

—From *Urban Dictionary*, “Koreaboo”

You could say I am obsessed with all things Korea. It's the kind of obsession that has crept in slowly, like water settling in the cracks of a sidewalk. It started with pressing play on a Korean drama that popped up on my Netflix recommendations, which led to watching a few more series. Eventually, my Netflix history faced total infiltration, with *Friends* and *The Office* being booted out in favor of *Crash Landing on You* and *Immortal Classic*. Somewhere along the way, I stopped craving cheesy pizza and chocolate and started longing for bubbling hot *soondubu jjigae*, Melona pops, and *samgyeopsal* off the grill. Even long car drives have stopped sounding the same—my favorite playlists of American indie and pop morphed into a strange compilation of Red Velvet hits and Kwon Jin Ah's acoustic jazz album. Before I knew it, the trickle of interest that began with a Korean drama had slowly impeded my daily life and cracked it open like a sidewalk in winter.

Last March, when I was discussing my newfound love of Korean music and dramas with a friend from college (white), he jokingly told me that I was turning into a “Koreaboo.” I wasn’t completely oblivious to the offense of the term’s implications, but I just half-laughed and moved on. I figured there was no point in starting a row when my only comeback was the most visually obvious statement I could possibly make: How can I be a “Koreaboo” if I’m really Korean?

It’s an interesting experience being the international diplomat of your own identity. It’s a constant state of conflict negotiation and mediation, complete with periods of alliance, neutrality, and sometimes, warfare. Growing up as a Korean child who was adopted by white parents as an infant, it took me a while to realize that there was any conflict at all. I knew that most kids looked like their parents and didn’t go to Korean school on the weekends, but I didn’t think much of it at the time. It was only when I began elementary school in a largely white school district that I experienced the first stirrings of a conflict that would escalate to all-out warfare in my high school years.

One of my earliest memories of racial awareness is from first grade, when our teacher, Mrs. Coomey, thought she would be creative and line us up by middle name rather than last name. While half of the girls in my class lined up with their matching “Elizabeths” and “Maries,” I stood alone in the “J” section of the line with the boys whose middle names were “John.” My middle name, Jung Hee, is my Korean birth name, which I was proud of until that day. I hated telling it to anyone for the next ten years after the boys in my class said it sounded like the word “junkie.”

I went to Korean school from the age of five to eight. In Korean school, which took place at a Protestant church on Wednesday evenings, both children and parents took classes on language, culture, music, games, and cooking in order to learn more about our (the kids’) Korean heritage. All of us, except for one girl that I remember, were Korean adoptees—Korean children brought to the U.S. at a young age who had white parents, and whose white parents thought it would be beneficial to educate us and themselves on our culture. But the Korean school did have one problem: its high turnover rate. As much as the parents nagged us to continue our studies and as much as the teachers begged us to stay, none of us wanted to be there, and nothing could change that. Looking back, it makes a lot of sense. Almost all of us came from a primarily white suburban area, went to stable and highly rated schools with majorities of white students, had white parents whom we adored, white friends, and white Barbie Dolls or superheroes. Why the hell would we care about Korean culture?

One of the biggest ironies of it all is that Important, Educated people now tell me about the immense cognitive and practical benefits of being bilingual and multiculturally educated—a global citizen, so to say. Bilingualism is seen

as the future of the globalized world—it broadens job prospects, strengthens resumes, shows intercultural competence. At eight years old, I was just thrilled to finally be able to do the fun stuff that normal white kids do, like dance classes and soccer leagues. Eleven years after dropping out of Korean school, I am uncoordinated, unathletic, and monolingual. Talk about a lack of foresight.

For sixteen of my nineteen years of life, I wanted to be white. I didn't want to be visibly different, visibly Asian, growing into a separate standard of Eastern beauty that could never match the blonde-haired, blue-eyed dolls we had learned to worship when we were young. In high school, I desperately wished that I would grow into my looks like the other girls did, but I soon realized that “glowing up” wasn't even possible for me in the same way it was for others—I couldn't just dye my hair and lose weight and put on some makeup to look how I wanted. I would have to change my DNA or get as close to it as I could. I would have to sew my eyelids up to widen my eyes, bleach my hair from the root down, bleach my face to match. I wished so ardently that it would happen but realized that it wasn't physically possible, and so I looked to other modes of whiteness.

It is a common story, among Korean Adoptees, and in general among Asians who just want to fit in. It starts young, with friends and family and books and movies. We learn to love them—our mentors, our favorite characters, our heroes. Naturally, we want to be like them. Often, this starts with how they look, but this is impossible by the sheer force of genetics. So instead, we turn to acting like them and mimicking their behavior. Learning the classic songs like “Brown Eyed Girl” and “I Want It That Way,” wearing ripped jeans and college hoodies, laughing off the occasional racist comments or awkward inquiries into where we are really from. There's nothing wrong with embracing American culture when you live in America. It only becomes a problem when American culture becomes mutually exclusive with your own to the point of blatant rejection.

Why were we so eager to quit Korean school? Why did we blush when we were asked to say our Korean names? Why did we wish for big blue eyes instead of a puppy on Christmas Eve? And above all, why did our love for the people around us have to sharpen the blade of hatred for ourselves?

As the “model minority,” it's easy for Asian people to keep their heads down and blend in with the crowd. Sometimes we're even able to pass off as white, or act so “normally” that our faces blur in the minds of others to the point of whiteness. Oftentimes, this works in our favor. But what many people don't understand is the deep wars that we wage within ourselves because of it. Whiteness, in its power and supremacy, is aggressive. In the way that it pervades the consciousnesses of people of color, including Asian people,

it attacks people at the core of who they are: their names, their bodies, their languages, their traditions.

I often think of those who lost themselves in battle. The girl in my high school class who was gorgeous enough to win Miss Vietnam, but still told me that she wished she was “at least half-Asian-half-white because mixed Asians are prettier.” The boy majoring in business who had a distinctly Chinese name and told me he’ll change it to something American when he’s older to seem “more professional.” The friend who told me he hopes his kids inherit his girlfriend’s white looks to save them the trouble of looking Asian.

This isn’t to say that our wars are the fault of any given white person. It is our fault, as an American society, for failing people of color time and again. It is also the fault of history, though there are certainly people to blame behind that as well. To put it in the context of my Netflix list, the last episode of *Crash Landing on You* (a wildly popular Korean drama) aired February 16, 2020. Lana Condor, a Vietnamese-American actress, became well known for her role as Lara Jean following the release of *To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before* on August 17, 2018. Earlier in the same month of the same year, *Crazy Rich Asians* blew up the box office and gained critical acclaim for its all-Asian cast, an iconic first for Hollywood. On June 19, 1998, Fa Mulan became the first and only Disney Princess of East Asian descent.

For Asian people, it’s been a very long road to seeing and being seen on screen. I often wonder what would have been different if the Asian Americans of my generation had grown up adoring protagonists with names and bodies like our own. What might have changed if the people around us knew more about our cultures and lives? If we weren’t exoticized and poked and prodded and asked what it’s like to “see through small eyes?”

In 2020, I don’t know if I would say that America has treated us kindly as a people, but at least we can find solace in entertainment that includes us, features us, and sometimes even does us proud. When I watch Korean dramas, I might not understand the words they are speaking or pick up on the subtleties of their humor, but at least their faces look like mine. For the ninety minutes of the episode, I can see my country’s culture and life on full display, shameless and unaware of its own mundane beauty. I can whisk back hundreds of years in time to the Joseon dynasty, and watch women wearing *hanboks* and living in *hanoks*. I can peer across the ocean in the present and watch young men complete their mandatory military service, watch high school students cram for their college entrance exams, see them fall in love and get married in traditional dress. Sometimes, I can even pretend that I also live in a world where it is normal to see people who look like me, rather than glimpsing them across campus and feeling like I’ve spotted some rare bird that could take flight in a second if I approach too enthusiastically.

So am I a “Koreaboo” for loving Korean Dramas? For listening to “Talk to Me in Korean” to try to scrounge any bits of language I have left? For eating kimchi and rice for breakfast? What about for announcing myself as *Anna Jung Hee Lynch* without ducking my head in shame?

“You’re turning into a Koreaboo,” he had said with a snicker. I laughed along with him and jokingly got mad, telling him that I can’t be a “Koreaboo” if I’m really Korean. A pause. I could feel the words hanging off the tip of his tongue: *You’re not really Korean though. You act white.* He was smart enough to leave them inside his mouth, but the heavy pause was enough for me to catch the gist of the message. I quickly changed the subject and tried to move on.

I am no longer upset about my friend’s off-key joke, but the word itself still fills me with a feeling that I couldn’t put words to for years. The word, which serendipitously is Korean, is *han*. It’s more of a concept than a word, according to scholars of Korean culture. The definition is strikingly summative—“In the most basic sense, [*han*] is understood as rancor or grief, which is a consequence of a persistent injustice due to asymmetric power relations or an inability to take proper means to solve the suffering.”¹

The term “Koreaboo” fills me with *han* in every way. I wonder, in the moments when I am consumed by my *han*, what more white people can take from me. How much more can they mock my identity, batter it relentlessly, and toss it to the gutter like a cheap mask I only wore for a Halloween party? How was I supposed to react to being seen as white, when it took me, *us*, so long to finally be seen as Asian people?

I love many white people. My parents, best friends, trusted teachers, and classmates are white. But in moments like these, when I read the usage example of “Koreaboo” on Urban Dictionary which states, “*Jackie is such a Koreaboo, she’s American but she shouts ‘OPPA’ at random Asian men and tries to look Korean by gluing her eyelids down,*” I wonder what kind of pain I would have to inflict to make them understand, when words aren’t enough, when intelligent discussion is just another form of holding my *han* back.

As a college student picking up the pieces of the Korean identity I shattered in my youth, I look to “all things Korea” as a tool of learning, entertainment, reclamation, and healing. I am obsessed with all things Korea. I use Duolingo to learn Korean in my free time. I make white people jokes. I complain to high heaven about the lack of Asians at my college. I eat kimchi unapologetically, even though it stinks like death. I search for cute Asian boys at parties because I just want someone who understands what it’s like to live in this body. I jokingly tell my friends to call me *eonni*, because they should respect their goddamn elders.

But I am not a Koreaboo for doing so. I am just plain Korean.

1 “From Oldboy to Burning: Han in South Korean films” by Bjorn Boman