Manufacturing Dissidence: Arts and Letters of North Korea’s “Second Culture”

Christine Hong

Axis of Evil Come Home

Reporting on US evangelical leadership on the issue of North Korean human rights, David Kirkpatrick of the New York Times described an unlikely scene at the three-day Rock-the-Desert Christian music festival held in Midland, Texas, the hometown of the then president George W. Bush, in late summer of 2005: “Between the Prayer Tent and an abstinence-promotion booth, . . . worshipful revelers also stumbled into a more sobering pavilion, the North Korea Genocide Exhibit.” Inside the tent, Kang Chol Hwan, a North Korean defector who had been “recently summoned to meet President Bush” in Washington, DC, signed copies of his memoir, The Aquariums of Pyongyang: Ten Years in the North Korean Gulag (2001). Seated amidst “drawings by defectors depict[ing] the torture of North Korean Christians,”
a video screening of “shaky, grainy footage of two public executions,” and a simulated gas chamber featuring “a bloody mannequin and baby doll.” Kang, by dint of his status as a survivor of the infamous Yodok labor camp in North Korea, lent authenticating force to the grisly displays around him. For the fifty-thousand-odd festival-goers, however, who likely knew little about the preceding six decades of US foreign policy toward Korea, let alone US centrality to the “forgotten war,” these installations did nothing to furnish critical historical context, much less performatively to implicate them within a brutal history of US interventionism on the Korean peninsula. Instead, aimed at maximum visual horror, the drawings, video, and mock gas chamber, with their dilated message of North Korean suffering and pain in the present, telegraphed the urgency of now, hailing their viewers into immediate action. Its ultimate purpose being the “goad[ing of] the [US] administration to block trade or unrestricted aid to North Korea,” this totalitarian Wunderkammer had been organized by the Midland Ministerial Alliance, a Texas-based evangelical organization whose policy clout during the Bush years rapidly outgrew its local provenance—indeed whose advocacy was instrumental to the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004. To the crowd of children “gawking at the gas chamber figures,” Deborah Fikes, the organization’s executive director, preached the moral necessity of proxy representation and action in order to save the mute victims of North Korea: “God,” she stated, “has picked us to be their voice.”

Yet, we might pause here. If colonialism’s “golden age” supposedly came to an end, as Jean-Paul Sartre famously declared in the preface to Frantz Fanon’s The Wretched of the Earth, when “the mouths [of the colonized] opened by themselves,” then the matter of ventriloquism that plagues North Korean human rights discourse and the conspicuous double-voicedness of North Korean defector testimony should lead us to inquire into the geopolitical conditions under which the North Korean can be heard at all.

**Literature of Intervention**

This essay inquires into the contemporaneity of Korean War literature, in light of the fact that the war, the Cold War’s first hot conflict, has yet to be concluded long after the declared end of the Cold War elsewhere around
the globe. Rather than focus on the usual suspects—for example, veterans’ memoirs or fictional accounts that take the Korean War as their retrospective subject or setting, thereby presuming the war’s historical location in the past—I instead examine two works published in the past decade and a half, a North Korean defector memoir and a Korean American “roots” narrative, both of which cast a simultaneously backward and anticipatory gaze upon North Korea: namely, Kang Chol Hwan’s critically lauded memoir, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, coauthored by Pierre Rigoulot and published in 2001 in English translation, and Helie Lee’s *In the Absence of Sun: A Korean American Woman’s Promise to Reunite Three Lost Generations of Her Family*, a 2002 tale of rescue that extends from Lee’s North Korean origins story in her 1997 first-person “memoir” of her grandmother’s life, *Still Life with Rice: A Young American Woman Discovers the Life and Legacy of Her Korean Grandmother*. The continuity between these works can be discerned in their possessive claims north of the demilitarized zone (DMZ) and their proxy performance as seemingly liberated “North Korean” expressions. In this essay, I examine how these markedly post-9/11, “axis of evil” writings, which frame North Koreans as subjects in need of rescue from the dark forces of tyranny, have wielded human rights discourse toward interventionist ends and in so doing contributed to the continuing irresolution of the Korean War. Critical to my inquiry is the question of how such writings, promoted within US policy and human rights circles as a “second culture” to North Korea’s official state-sanctioned culture, have served in the arena of geopolitics as vehicles for “dissident” North Korean voices in lieu of an available samizdat literature.

In what follows, I focus on the geopolitics of reception particular to these literary works as they were mobilized within US policy circles during the post-9/11 Bush era. Furnishing glimpses into desperation inside North Korea and on the North Korea–China border, Kang’s and Lee’s accounts have been read instrumentally as intelligence within the context of US foreign policy and were mobilized in the run-up and follow-up to the unanimous passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act—a 2004 bill reauthorized in 2008 and 2012. Reducible not simply to ethnography, or to a hermeneutics of reading minority writings for information, these memoirs have, to no small degree, been “translated” into policy discourse, with Kang and Lee
testifying before Congress with “insider” accounts of North Korea. Here, we might be reminded, as former Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Inspector General Frederick Hitz has stated, “Where it has no physical presence, the [CIA] has historically relied for humint primarily on defectors, detainees, legal travelers, opposition groups, and foreign government liaison services, but these sources divulge their secrets at some distance in time and space from the ongoing developments inside the target they are reporting on.”8 Even as humint (human intelligence), so pivotal to making the case for the US invasion in Iraq, has been discredited as an evidentiary source relative to Iraqi weapons of mass destruction—its unreliability not only a matter of content, with “Curveball” admitting he fabricated his testimony, but also a symptom of intelligence collection as itself a flawed epistemological process—it is crucial to note that humint along with satellite imaging are the two primary post-9/11 modes of knowing North Korea within both Washington, DC, policy and US-based human rights advocacy circles.9 If, moreover, the task of intelligence is transgressive—entailing infiltration “into the forbidden and protected space, cross[ing of] borders, and investigat[ion of] the enemy’s territory,” all under the permissive sign of war—Kang’s and Lee’s accounts crucially signaled the penetrability of North Korea in a historically interventionist moment in US “axis of evil” policy.10

So how should we read such literature? On the one hand, Kang’s “gulag” memoir and Lee’s account of the rescue of her North Korean relatives can be seen as tales of uprooting and multiple displacements and in this regard arguably merit being read not cynically as policy prescriptions—much less as humint—but located more sympathetically within what Gavan McCormack has called “the trauma and tragedy of Korean history, the half century of Japanese colonialism, the externally imposed division, the terrible civil war turned by external intervention into a catastrophe, and the prolonged Cold War that continues on the peninsula to this day.”11 In an atypical moment, The Aquariums of Pyongyang invites just such a contextual reading, giving expression to the exilic yearnings that haunt successive generations of Kang’s family—his grandfather a labor migrant during the era of Japanese colonial rule, his father a part of the 1960s chongryon exodus from Japan to North Korea, and Kang a North Korean defector who resides in Seoul: “My grandfather lived in Japan full of longing for his native Cheju [Jeju] Island.
My father lived in North Korea and was nostalgic for Japan. And me, I sit recalling my life’s story in Seoul, gnawed at by the Pyongyang of my youth.”12 Lee’s account, too, is affectively structured by her grandmother’s “legendary past, from her childhood days in her father’s house in Pyongyang to running a prosperous opium business in China, defying the communists, and surviving the Korean War.”13 Yet, on the other hand, these staunchly anticommunist works and their authors cannot be described as having a merely symptomatic relationship to “the trauma and tragedy of Korean history.” Rather, to use a Fowler-esque phrase from Graham Greene’s *The Quiet American*, they have been *engagé* on the rightward side of US foreign policy. To *read* these works—to arrive at their significance—is, I therefore argue, necessarily to consider them as framed modes of literary expression whose meaning overwhelmingly derives from the extra-literary conditions of their reception, from, this is to say, their articulation and mobilization within the geopolitics of the unending Korean War.

It merits narrowing our focus to that literary weapon otherwise known as the defector memoir, a securitized form of writing whose surface similarity to autobiography and other forms of narrative self-disclosure should not obscure its status as intelligence.14 Inescapably geopolitical, the defector memoir demands to be understood—to borrow from Asian American writer Frank Chin—as an “act of war, openly disguised as literature.”15 We might ask: how does this genre—associated in its “Korean” instance with a North Korea–born author, often produced in South Korea as site of resettlement, and almost always directed at a US, or global North, readership—unsettle available paradigms for reading exilic, minority, diasporic, or “third world” literatures? How, this is to say, do we *locate* such literature? Inassimilable into any one national literary canon or corpus—North Korean, South Korean, or US—the defector memoir is defined, above all, by its instrumentality in an uneven global landscape of power. Premised on the illegitimacy of North Korea as the state of origin, the defector memoir represents the expression of a deracinated singularity, namely, the defector, that can be mobilized toward supranational or sovereignty-challenging ends—in the most extreme realization, regime change. To quote Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn somewhat against the grain, this is the threat or danger of “the writer [as] an alternate government.”16 Yet, the heroism of the defector as a single vulner-
able subject, a David who stands up to a Goliath, or North Korea depicted as a predatory, exterminationist state, is misleading in its representation of the asymmetrical terrain of power because the lone individual, in point of fact, is never quite alone, and the slingshot contains far more than stones. Unlike “third world literature,” in Fredric Jameson’s well-known formulation, in which “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society,” there can be no ready presumption of “third world” collectivity behind the first-person utterance in the defector memoir. To the contrary, shadowing the words of the defector is first world might. Furthermore, it is the perverse insistence upon the spokesperson function of this writing, received as it is with all-too-ready acclaim, which lends to the North Korean defector a de facto political legitimacy, authority, and recognition not accorded to North Korea as a state.

The governing presumption behind the North Korean defector memoir, in other words, is the criminality and illegitimacy of North Korea as a state—in US political parlance, North Korea as a “rogue state”—and the visible sign of the state’s forfeiture of sovereign right can be found in the memoir’s depiction of subjects reduced to subhumanity by the “regime.” “Used to describe regimes whose internal actions—how they treated their own people—were viewed as abhorrent” and evocative of Orientalist notions of barbarism, the term rogue state may have “no formal standing in international law,” yet it has lurked in policies aimed at regime change. As a statement of intent, moreover, this charge can be meaningfully made by only those “states that have at their disposal the greatest force and are ready to call the [‘rogue states’] to order . . . if need be by armed intervention.”

Presented in the language of democracy and human rights—what Kang, in The Aquariums of Pyongyang, calls “a hastened liberation followed by true democracy in my homeland”—regime change by hard or soft means is the implicit goal of the defector memoir. And it is here, in our “post-Cold War context marked by an unprecedented militarization of the world by a singular hegemonic power,” as Randall Williams points out in his powerful critique of the violence of the contemporary human rights regime, that we can see how human rights have “emerged as the privileged epistemic for political violence.” Not simply a neutral analytic whereby political violence can
be registered and condemned, human rights in our era have been wielded as a unilateral tool of power that legitimates further political violence—an equivocal discourse, in other words, that anticipates and justifies war. As Wendy Brown observes, human rights activism might “generally present . . . itself as something of an antipolitics—a pure defense of the innocent and the powerless against power, a pure defense of the individual against immense and potentially cruel or despotic machineries of culture, state, war, ethnic conflict, tribalism, patriarchy, and other mobilizations or instantiations of collective power against individuals.” Yet, by sanctioning “the right to invasion,” a unilateral prerogative exclusive to power, human rights discourse consents to the likelihood of more, if not immeasurably greater, devastation.

With its fixation on and prioritization of “pain and suffering” in the present, human rights as a seemingly antipolitical, moral discourse evacuates historical context; indeed, it implies the excess, obscenity, and apologetic nature of a temporal frame beyond the most immediate. “The specific political situation that led to the abuses, the colonial history and the conflicts that matured into civil war, the economics that allowed the famine to develop, all these are irrelevant from the perspective of the moralist,” jurist Costas Douzinas points out. When wielded against the former third world, human rights discourse wipes the balance sheet clean. Moreover, insofar as human rights, as a justifying language of power, operates amnesiacally, it renders colonial injustices, the authorizing substance of anticolonial nationalist narratives, beside the point; in so doing, it demotes unredressed, often ongoing histories of colonial violence and unsettled grievances to mere footnote status. In the case of US–North Korea relations, not only must the counterrevolutionary nature of prior US intervention in the Korean War—“a civil and revolutionary war, a people’s war”—be wholly disavowed, but also, the militarized legacies and illiberal consequences of US involvement in the Korean peninsula are read, in an etiological inversion, as cause for possible further action.

We might further observe: human rights critique throughout the Cold War may have been mobilized by both capitalist and socialist powers in a mutual calling-out of state abuses. Yet, in an era triumphantly hailed as postsocialist, recourse to humanitarian discourse—to the logic of rescue—
as a way to legitimate aggressive intervention has become associated almost singularly with the United States. As the dominant lingua franca for social justice projects in our post–Cold War era, human rights, wielded as an antipolitics that “displaces, competes with, refuses, or rejects other political projects, including those also aimed at producing justice,” have also functioned to mop up residues of socialism.\(^{28}\) Not “a sign of hope, but part of an ominous trend toward the extension of a neoliberal, global capitalist hegemony,” human rights critique and its prescriptive double, transitional justice, stipulate less liberation per se than a strikingly homogeneous, neoliberal future.\(^{29}\) In his account of the institutional consolidation of contemporary human rights, historian Samuel Moyn argues that its emergence as a “new, moralized” policy regime was catalyzed by “the reception of Soviet and later East European dissidents by politicians, journalists, and intellectuals,” giving rise to a narrow form of internationalism based on individual rights.\(^{30}\) For “emerging neoconservatives” in the United States, human rights, narrowly “understood as anticommunism by another name,” enabled US foreign policy that systematically sought to erode third world self-determination, despite the fact, as Moyn contends, that human rights in its mid-century United Nations origins were central to “the master principle of collective self-determination.”\(^{31}\)

This prevailing counterrevolutionary conception of human rights, which aims to bring certain targeted “evil” pasts to closure and to foreclose other futures, has profound temporal implications.\(^{32}\) Within the normatively post-socialist framework of the contemporary human rights regime, North Korea can appear only as a temporal aberration—the fact of its perdurability an offense grievous enough for it to be yoked, along with Iraq and Iran, in a tripartite “axis of evil” destined for eradication. In the North Korean defector memoir, North Korea is time-marked by anticipation of its obsolescence. Situated in retrospect relative to the defector’s present, North Korea is emplotted proleptically as that failed political experiment that, in a world-historical sense, must be overcome. The physical and spiritual journey of the defector from the benighted confines of North Korea to the neon lights of Seoul—from “hell” to “loud, luminous paradise”—is thus not just a trajectory from past to present, from scarcity to consumption, but more pointedly a temporalizing political claim for a specifically capitalist modernity and
an eschatological move toward postsocialism. In this case less a periodizing description than a transitional political challenge, *postsocialist* denotes the political project of the contemporary human rights regime, which, by sounding the death knell for socialism, aims to realize what Jacques Derrida dubs the “democracy-to-come” and in so doing serves “as much a brief for capitalism as for human rights.”

Insofar as the defector memoir aims at the deterritorialization of North Korea as a sovereign entity, it stages an attempt at rollback within the realm of letters, a destabilizing, reconfigurative claim upon literary space as a political geography in its own right. If, as literary critic Pascale Casanova has argued, “true political independence” is necessary for “a national literary space to come into being”—here, in accordance with Fanon’s concept of a decolonizing “literature of combat” that “calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation,” a literature, in other words, of defense—the defector memoir, by contrast, must be understood as a literature of unending war, of intervention. Tied to discourses of rescue and liberation, such literature does not affirm the “existence [of the third world] nation” but rather agitates against it. Of an “epistemology of enmity,” the defector memoir is “a weapon if it can be used against the enemy to gain a strategic advantage. The important criterion here is not truth versus falsehood, but rather tactical effectiveness.” Like intelligence, this geopolitical form of writing—this literary weapon—knows no allegiance yet “is always biased, whether in the hands of allies or enemies, and thus [is] inherently bound to the side that uses it.”

Understanding such work as literature of unending war, I therefore argue, entails more than grappling with narrative content alone, much less performing standard close textual analysis, which would be to misread means as ends. Rather, by highlighting the fundamental geopolitical challenge, the deterritorializing encroachment, that such literature poses within what Casanova calls the “world republic of letters,” I contend that the defector memoir must be read in terms of the conditions of its reception. Not just a secondary stage of literary practice consequent to a prior act of publication, reception, I argue, is an anticipatory structure that not only fosters defector narration but also in some cases helps to script or author it.
Sponsored “Dissidence”

Having prematurely “shed tears of joy” upon his arrival in South Korea where he sought asylum in 1992, North Korean defector Kang Chol Hwan “was struck speechless,” as he puts it, when a South Korean journalist inquired, “‘Did you concoct part of your story with the help of Seoul’s intelligence service?’”40 Marking the beginning of his “ordeal in the so-called free world,” the cynicism of this “ridiculous question,” he soon discovered, would be mirrored in the jaundiced resistance of the South Korean literary market to his and other North Korean defector writings about their experience in political labor camps—a “moral slumber,” in his view, that was of a continuum with the willed indifference of those Germans and Poles who refused to acknowledge “that the smoke and ashes blown to the village by the wind, day in and day out, actually came from the burning of human bodies within the concentration camps.”41 Having spent “ten years in Yodok,” Kang states that he felt he had a moral obligation “to expose the existence of these camps, to denounce the way North Korea’s population was being walled in, surveyed, and punished under the slightest pretext.”42 Yet despite his outrage at the journalist’s question—an ire so lingering that he revisits this bitter exchange over a dozen years later in a 2005 preface to his 2001 The Aquariums of Pyongyang, arguably the most celebrated North Korean defector memoir—he sidesteps the actual question.43

In a February 2006 New York Times article, veteran Asia reporter, Norimitsu Onishi, answers the question for him. Describing the “spearheading” of North Korean human rights “by conservative [South Korean] Christians who aim to take their faith to the northern half of the divided peninsula,” Onishi sketches the contours of the transnational funding matrix behind this rights-based activism. By loosely following the money, he unmaskst such human rights agitation not as a virtuous “defense of the innocent and the powerless against power” (Brown) but rather as a collaborative intelligence operation that marshals cultural capital toward profoundly geopolitical ends. Pointing out the ideological utility of human rights critique in South Korea’s condemnation of North Korea prior to liberal administrations of Kim Dae Jung and Noh Moo Hyun, he writes, “Until the start of its ‘sunshine policy’ of engagement in the late 1990’s [sic], the South Korean govern-
ment highlighted the North’s human rights violations. The Korean Central
Intelligence Agency debriefed North Korean defectors and urged some of
them to turn their statements into books.” Onishi offers a revealing illus-
tration: “intermediaries connected with [South Korea's] intelligence agency
helped” Kang, “co-chairman of NK Gulag, which is supported by the [US]
National Endowment for Democracy,” to “publish his memoir after he
Japanese and South Korean media merely “for opening [his] mouth” about
his incarceration in North Korea, Kang concedes, in his coauthored memoir,
that he “occasionally felt [he] was trading [his] experience for a story . . .
no longer entirely [his] own.”

Noting the irony of the cultural battle waged by the CIA “for men's
minds” throughout the Cold War, Frances Stonor Saunders, in The Cultural
Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters (1999), underscores the
agency’s behind-the-scenes role in fostering the very modes of expression
that would in turn be showcased as proof of the natural preeminence of US
freedom and democracy. Didn’t the CIA’s covert cultural intervention, its
clandestine funding of arts and letters throughout the Cold War, she asks,
“risk producing, instead of freedom, a kind of ur-freedom, where people
think they are acting freely, when in fact they are bound to forces over which
they have no control?” Saunders’s inquiry highlights the paradox of “free-
dom” as Cold War shibboleth, given its manipulated and manufactured—at
once ideologically constrained and politically motivated—performance.

We might reorient and extend Saunders’s question: in the wake of serial
US “losses” in Asia during the Cold War, first China, then North Korea,
finally Vietnam, how has Asian “dissident” expression been imprinted by
these policy failures and conscripted in the service of an ongoing culture
war? Here, some of the classic bugaboos of Asian American Studies—for
example, the heated debate over ethnic autobiography, polemically described
by writer Frank Chin as a mode of “yellow” prostration or the ideological
utility of the model minority as a containment tool—might productively
be revisited. How might ethnic autobiography or memoir, disparaged by
Chin as a literary “process of conversion” that “submits” the Asian subject
“to others for judgment,” or the Asian as model minority be reconceived


as geopolitical markers of collaboration or securitized forms of humanity when situated within a militarized US mapping of the Asia-Pacific region?

The remarkable receptivity of the US literary market over the past two decades to memoirs by Chinese, North Korean, and to some degree Vietnamese dissidents, defectors, refugees, and immigrants, as well as first- and second-generation Asian Americans, points to an ongoing US cultural struggle with Asia’s “last Leninists,” however residually socialist those states might be. Here, we might think of the writings of Harry Wu, Anchee Min, Guanlong Cao, Jun Chang, Dai Sijie, Yiyun Li, Liu Xiaobo, Soon Ok Lee, Hyok Kang, Yong Kim, Shin Dong Hyuk, Mike Kim, Krys Lee, Laura Ling, Duong Thu Huong, among others, as a kind of postsocialist archive in the making. Haunted by the specter of incomplete US hot war intervention in Asia, such Asian and Asian American anticommunist writings assume the continuing necessity of the United States as interlocutor, if not rescuer, thereby implicitly challenging the periodizing designation “post–Cold War.” Offering a composite portrait of human suffering under Asian “totalitarianism” and, in some instances, explicit endorsement of Western liberal ideals and free-market capitalism, these transpacific memoirs variously follow the blueprint of earlier anti-Stalinist conversion narratives such as Arthur Koestler’s 1940 landmark denunciation of the Soviet system, *Darkness at Noon*. Yet, despite the important role that such narratives of disenchantment and disillusionment with Asian socialism have played in the development of hawkish foreign policy, they are still largely undertheorized in terms of their geopolitical specificity and present-day ideological utility. We might ask: to what extent can this body of transpacific memoirs be understood less as organic, spontaneous, or vernacular performances in freedom of expression—much less as expressions of freedom—than as narratives if not dictated in advance then fostered with an eye to their anticipated reception? Mobilized by the US right in legislative and political arenas, such postsocialist memoirs do not, after all, merely describe terror and dehumanization under Asian socialism. On occasion, they have informed US neoconservative censure of China, North Korea, and Vietnam and even framed foreign policy. Far from decisively declaring the Cold War’s demise, many of these “dissident” bildungsromane and Asian American “roots” narratives seek to hasten the world-historical end of Asian socialism. In this
sense, the exilic and immigrant speaking subjects of this geopolitical body of literature, whose “loyalty to homeland and American patriotism” tellingly present little contradiction, function simultaneously as proxy “voices of America” and as unofficial yet more legitimate representatives of the Asian nations from which they hail.\(^{50}\)

Within the transnational contours of the unending Korean War, Kang Chol Hwan’s *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*, a memoir critically lauded for its searing portrait of survival in a North Korean labor camp, offers a key case in point. Condemned with his family, ethnic Koreans from Japan who voluntarily “repatriated” to North Korea in the 1960s, to incarceration at Yodok after his grandfather is accused of having committed “a crime of high treason,” Kang comes of age, as his memoir describes, in a “world of phantoms and nonentities,” a bleak society of cast-off subjects including “members of landholding families, capitalists, U.S. or South Korean agents, Christians, [and] members of purged Party circles deemed noxious to the state.”\(^{51}\) The trajectory from these inauspicious beginnings to his life as a journalist and a human rights activist in Seoul reaches a zenith when he is invited to the Oval Office in June 2004.

Kang, according to media reports, was welcomed with a warmth exceeding that accorded the South Korean head of state, Noh Moo-Hyun, whose commitment to the Sunshine Policy of his predecessor, Kim Dae-Jung, placed him at odds with Bush’s axis-of-evil framing of North Korea. Journalists present at this meeting observed that Kang’s account of imprisonment in and eventual escape from North Korea “seemed to bolster [Bush’s] longstanding hostility” toward that country—so much so that as “diplomats tried to revive stalled talks on North Korea’s nuclear weapons program, Mr. Bush told reporters in Washington that Kim Jong Il, the North Korean leader, was a ‘dangerous person’ who ran ‘huge concentration camps.’”\(^{52}\) For a time following Bush’s reading of the memoir, his administration maintained that “any package solution for North Korea’s nuclear weapons program [would] have to include progress on human rights.”\(^{53}\) *The Aquariums of Pyongyang*—one of the earliest and most heralded *gwalliso* (labor camp) memoirs—was thus mobilized in DC policy circles as an insider’s timely exposé of North Korea, a country otherwise deemed an intelligence “black hole.”\(^{54}\) Bush not only urged his close advisers to study the memoir but also...
believed this account of North Korea’s inhumanity should be required reading for “all Americans.” For his part, Kang found the US president to be so keenly receptive that their meeting signaled no less than the workings of divine intervention. That a former “nine-year-old boy-slave from North Korea” would be invited to confer intimately on North Korea policy with “the president of the world’s most powerful nation”—in a meeting arranged by the Defense Forum Foundation, a DC security organization that brings North Korean defectors to Capitol Hill—could only mean that “the Lord wanted to . . . let the blind world see what is happening to His people in North Korea.”

In a 2005 appended preface to the memoir, Kang, a born-again Christian, describes this meeting along salvational lines. Infiltrated news of his White House reception would strike those “200,000 political prisoners” in North Korea, victims of “a failed experiment in human history called communism,” as if—in Kang’s hyperbolic phrase—“they had had an encounter with the Savior himself.”

Tied closely to a US and South Korean hard-line stance toward North Korea, this politicized discourse of Christian salvation directed toward the northern part of the Korean peninsula has functioned as a kind of interventionist theology, animating with renewed vigor the necessity of joint-US and South Korean “liberation” of North Korea from the godlessness of communism. In tandem with Bush’s axis-of-evil policy toward North Korea, a 2003 State Department report “declared North Korea the globe’s worst abuser of religious freedom” as part of “a broader strategy that [sought] to undermine the very regime itself.” Rehabilitated through Christian conversion as a prototype for a US-aligned democracy-to-come, the North Korean defector has emerged as a critical figure in a postsocialist policy agenda toward the Korean peninsula some several decades after the declared start of the Korean War. Entreated by Bush during their Oval Office session to offer specific recommendations, Kang proposed that the United States adopt an ominously titled “Eclipse Policy” toward North Korea, a regime-changing stance directly at variance with the engagement principles of South Korea’s Sunshine Policy. Such a policy would permit no softness even with regard to humanitarian food aid—a view substantially mirroring Bush’s own. Using the Wall Street Journal as a platform to argue that “to give aid, or to agree to bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and North
Korea” would be to “prolong [the] suffering” of “the North Korean people,” Kang, insisting that North Korea was “on the brink of collapse,” advised the then secretary of state Condoleezza Rice to “remain steadfast in resisting calls by [Noh Moo-Hyun’s] government to give aid to North Korea.” Published shortly after his White House visit, Kang, in his op-ed, reminded the US public that “the darkest moment of night is right before dawn,” urging his readers to steel themselves for an apocalyptic policy approach to North Korea—painful in the interim but salvational in the long run. Of Kang’s meeting of the minds with Bush, Gavan McCormack writes, “Some weeks after meeting the president, Kang recounted Bush’s question: if the two were to change places, what would Kang adopt as basic US policy on North Korea? Kang replied that he thought priority should be given to human rights over nuclear matters since, he said, that was what the people of North Korea most cared about. Bush, he said, responded with enthusiastic agreement.” Albeit improbable, the counterfactual operation proposed by Bush—“if the two were to change places”—signaled remarkable fusion of political purpose, if not willed blurring of subjectivity, between US head of state and North Korean defector during a historic moment of thawed intra-Korean engagement. Strikingly more at home with the Bush hard line than the “appeasement” of South Korea in which “too many people . . . have turned a blind eye to the truth about North Korea,” Kang was received by Washington as an “alternate government” not only to Pyongyang but also to Seoul.

Hailed in the West as “a freedom fighter” and laureled as an “Asian Hero” by *Time Magazine* in 1996, Kang was also designated a “Hero of Human Rights and Democracy in North Korea” by the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 2003. Yet it is worth pausing to ask what it means for a North Korean defector to be interpellated by NED—a “quasi-private organization” created in 1983 under the Reagan administration, funded entirely by Congress, and empowered by “fiat to pursue . . . an independent foreign policy under the guise of ‘promoting democracy’” around the world. Of the operational value of its public-private nature, NED, in its 1984 “Statement of Principles and Objectives,” discloses the following rationale: “Expansion of private, voluntary initiatives to promote democracy internationally cannot be accomplished through governmental action
alone. Indeed, the creation and structure of the Endowment reflect the view that the U.S. private sector is both a more appropriate and a more effective vehicle than government for working with private groups abroad to advance the democratic cause.”65 Its website further acknowledges that “the Endowment’s nongovernmental character gives it a flexibility that makes it possible to work in some of the world’s most difficult circumstances, and to respond quickly when there is an opportunity for political change.”66 Otherwise put, NED’s privatized, “nongovernmental character” enables it to distribute US federal funds around the globe with considerable impunity, and to do so without the scrutiny, protocol, and red tape that typify, for example, United Nations agencies. Under NED auspices, political parties, political action groups, trade unions, private enterprises, human rights groups, Christian organizations, as well as nonstate media, culture, and propaganda industries in other countries can be sponsored via an influx of US government dollars. Programs and organizations receiving NED assistance are also often financed by the US State Department.67 Even as NED, with no apparent irony, advertises “the right of the people freely to determine their own destiny” as its idealized notion of democracy, in point of fact, it prescriptively channels funds to entities that align with and further US interests abroad.68 On the question of the autonomy of US-sponsored radio broadcasts in South Korea featuring North Korean defectors and aimed at listeners inside North Korea, an NED “priority country,” journalist Don Kirk states plainly, “Given [NED and State Department] funding for all these organizations, they’re not going to bite the hands that are feeding them.” By funding what it dubs “democrats who are working for freedom and human rights, often in obscurity and isolation” in far-flung global corners, NED, according to its website, thereby “sends an important message of solidarity” across national boundaries.69 Yet the line between “supporting democracy” and “destabilization,” as critics have pointed out, has historically proven to be thin at best.

Highlighting the continuity between NED and CIA activities, William Blum points out that “Allen Weinstein, who helped draft the legislation establishing NED, was quite candid when he said in 1991: ‘A lot of what we do today was done covertly 25 years ago by the CIA.’”70 Viewed by its backers as “lending a novel flexibility to Government-aided efforts abroad,” NED serves as a crucial mechanism via which the United States secures
its influence abroad, in effect sponsoring through privatized means “what official agencies” during the Cold War had “never been comfortable doing in public.”\textsuperscript{71} As Walden Bello incisively notes, “to maintain the reality of empire while concealing it, America has resorted to forging dependent political structures posing as carriers of democracy.”\textsuperscript{72} Yet if “democracy” was the ironic motto, if not red flag, for the CIA’s undemocratic Cold War activities, NED’s contemporary byword is human rights. As a consensus-securing discourse, an antipolitics with which it quells detractors’ concerns “that promoting democracy [is] tantamount to interfering in the internal affairs of other countries in the service of U.S. foreign policy interests,” human rights are the rallying cry around which NED has managed to garner broad bipartisan congressional backing.\textsuperscript{73} According to David Lowe, vice president of NED’s Government and External Affairs, “Although a few antagonists continue on occasion to voice opposition, their numbers have dwindled, particularly with changes after the Cold War in attitudes on the left toward U.S. internationalism.”\textsuperscript{74} This is to say, NED may extend and complement the CIA’s covert global realignment activities toward “US internationalism,” but it does so under not only theoretically more transparent funding auspices but also the bipartisan, implicitly postsocialist banner of human rights.

Central to NED’s objectives of “democratiz[ing] countries that remain totalitarian” and steering them toward “US internationalism” has been the targeted cultivation, promotion, and recognition of what it deems “worthy products of the unofficial (or ‘second’) culture of closed societies.” In order to foster this rival, exogenous “second” culture whose apparent openness contrasts with the repressive ideological constraints of the “official” culture of “closed societies,” NED identifies “dissemination of books, films, or television programs illuminating or advocating democracy,” in addition to promotion of “associations among pro-democratic intellectuals, writers, scientists, and artists,” as activities whose far-reaching potential to sway global popular opinion can facilitate the weakening or destabilization of “totalitarian” governments. Far from innocuous, these US-funded, geostrategic “efforts in the realm of culture and opinion assume special importance in closed societies” in which, according to NED, “other levers for promoting progress toward democracy are not available”—where, in other words, internal mechanisms
for advancing US interests are nonexistent or unreliable. Recalling the CIA’s
global Kulturkampf activities throughout the Cold War, NED’s efforts to
promote a second—namely, proxy and US-aligned—culture include the
“making available [of] outside sources of information and ideas” and “assist-
ing in the publication and dissemination of independent scholarly or artistic
works.” Through selective funding in the arenas of media and culture,
NED thereby subsidizes the expression of “freedom” around the world,
which it then touts as evidence of nascent rumblings of freedom of expres-
sion and human rights. These NED-sponsored second-cultural products are
rarely, however, critically examined as conduits for the exercise of US soft
power, much less read for their geostrategic value.

Rather, framed as a vehicle for “dissident” North Korean voices, the
geopolitical genre of the defector memoir has acquired global prominence
of place within “North Korean” second culture. Indeed, from the 1990s
onward, NED has cultivated defectors as the visible forefront of North
Korean human rights critique. Offering an unrivaled, if notoriously dif-
ficult to verify, firsthand glimpse into life under North Korean tyranny,
defectors and their subsidized writings are routinely showcased at US leg-
gislative hearings and international conferences organized around North
Korean human rights. In a September 23, 2010, congressional briefing,
NED president Carl Gershman, who also sits on the executive board of
the hawkish US Committee for Human Rights in North Korea, reported
on NED’s advances in democratizing North Korea from outside. Having
made significant strides “for human rights advocacy and documentation
(including nine annual international human rights conferences)” and prog-
ress in “broadcasting news and information into North Korea,” NED also
funded “a quarterly magazine, Imjingang [Imjin River], that gathers inform-
ation from within North Korea on culture, economics, politics, and other
developments and circulates it back inside” in addition to “helping defector
networks of students, intellectuals, and former military officials establish
channels of communication with counterparts inside North Korea to link
them for the first time to the world outside.” In particular, the 1998 launch
of a North Korea–specific grants program enabled NED to make inroads
in fostering the “intellectual and operational capacity” of defectors as “a
significant new asset in the struggle for human rights in North Korea.”
Long predicting North Korea’s collapse and looking ahead to the post-collapse reconstruction scenario, NED, against widespread South Korean perceptions of North Korean defectors and refugees “as an economic and social burden,” has endeavored to redefine them as a postsocialist vanguard whose representational function in “giving voice to the voiceless society left behind and interpreting that society to the larger world” positions them as key figures within “democracy after dictatorship.” As Suzanne Scholte, of the hard-right Defense Forum Foundation, stated at a September 20, 2011, congressional briefing, “one of the most important actions we can take is to empower the North Korean defectors to carry out their work for peaceful change and reunification.” Of this “empowerment” through funding for defector-based human rights initiatives and programs, Lynn Lee, NED’s North Korea program director, offered a more cynical spin at a May 2012 conference on North Korean human rights: “We do realize that North Korean defectors need a lot of hand-holding.”

Yet the subsidized nature of North Korean defector expression begs the question of the geopolitical circuitry and transnational networks out of which it is produced. If scripted in advance, defector writings are also simultaneously always already received. Indeed, NED, anticipating indifference to its sponsored second-cultural products, prioritizes their routing through influential, international opinion-making vectors. By tapping into the cultural capital of dominant cultural arenas, it has attempted to circumvent local apathy relative to what it claims is “dissident” writing. Given that world literary space is unequally structured, with “great national literary spaces” the oldest and “best endowed” relative to “literary spaces that have more recently appeared and that are poor by comparison,” NED exploits the asymmetry between “dominant and dominated literary spaces” in promoting North Korean defector memoirs in South Korea and Japan. Here, it is crucial to note that, in its aim of “opening . . . previously closed systems,” NED identifies “the resonance and support” of “free countries” as critical to “the sustainability of an independent public opinion.” Far from autonomous, however, the international reception of NED’s second-cultural products is carefully engineered. According to NED, the vitality of the cultural work of “brave people” who are “struggling for intellectual liberty and human rights” requires “recognition abroad [that] tends to provide ‘under-
ground’ scholars and artists, as well as human rights activists and political dissidents, with some Protection [sic] against government repression.”

Assuming some measure of international reception as a structural given, this self-looping arrangement is a necessary backdrop for understanding the staged debut of North Korean defector arts and letters within what Casanova calls a “world republic of letters.”

What are the implications of this post-9/11 exhaustive behind-the-scenes orchestration and global mounting of “North Korean” second culture? Lauded by George W. Bush as a vital “global campaign” essential to “freedom’s victory” against illiberal forces that would “rollback generations of democratic progress,” NED, during a historic era of coexistence and reconciliation between the two Koreas, assiduously cultivated South Korean cultural projects, especially those featuring defectors whose “human rights” advocacy might perform in lieu of dissident critique internal to North Korea. In this respect, NED’s “democracy-promoting” activities went against the grain of the proengagement policies pursued by Kim Dae-Jung and Noh Moo-Hyun, South Korean presidents (1998–2008) whose successive elections popularly symbolized the triumph of South Korean grassroots democratic struggle against US-backed right-wing dictatorships. It was, in other words, precisely during this democratic juncture that NED, praised by Bush for its work in “[speaking] for the rights of dissidents and the hopes of exiles,” played an instrumental role in undemocratically consolidating “civil-society” agitation against North Korea from within South Korea, a critical site of NED’s second-culture promotion relative to North Korea.

And it is here that the engineered success of Kang Chol Hwan’s memoir detailing the horrors of the Yodok labor camp stands as a particularly instructive example of NED’s assiduous cultivation of “North Korean” second culture. If, as reported by Norimitsu Onishi, Kang initially published his memoir with the assistance of “intermediaries connected with [South Korea’s] intelligence agency,” his fledgling Korean-language account of his gwalliso experience, Songs of the Prison Camp (1995) succeeded only in gathering dust, languishing on the shelves of South Korean bookstores. In contrast to the ready market for North Korean defector narratives in Japan, where such works often appear on “bestseller lists at bookstores across the nation,” South Korean literary space, much to Kang’s frustration, proved unreceptive
to a baffling degree. The indifference of the South Korean reading public to his account of North Korean barbarism was all the more egregious, in Kang’s view, in light of the “irrefutable fact” that “Koreans on both sides of the DMZ fall under [South Korean] sovereignty”—in other words, in light of North Korea’s illegitimacy as a state. Yet if otherwise fated to neglect in South Korea as a suspect literary form, one that encroached on North Korea’s sovereignty during a historic era of intra-Korean engagement, the North Korean defector memoir is associated with a weaponized mobility, a capacity to travel in impactful ways not conceivable for most non-Western literary works by fledgling writers. If, as Casanova suggests, exile for “writers from nationalized spaces” is “synonymous with autonomy,” by contrast, North Korean defector writing is defined by its constitutive dependency, however under-remarked its subsidized expression might be. Neither national nor international, such axis-of-evil literature might better be read as a “line of flight” that aims to deterritorialize North Korea by exposing it to be a “rogue” society before a global readership. Indeed, only by way of the global literary market—of reception secured abroad—was Kang’s gwalliso memoir able, at long last, to find an audience in South Korea. The 2005 republication of The Aquariums of Pyongyang, updated with a preface describing Kang’s meeting with Bush, ensured the memoir’s reception in South Korea: “I was introduced,” as Kang put it, “as someone who wrote a book that was read by George Bush.” Less a translation of Kang’s Korean-language Songs of a Prison Camp into English, the “book that was read by George Bush” represented the fruits of Kang’s strategic collaboration with his anticommmunist French coauthor, Pierre Rigoulot. Now more evocatively titled Les Aquariums de Pyongyang, Kang’s memoir would be reverse-engineered back into Korean. The multilingual itinerary of The Aquariums of Pyongyang bears remarking: published first in French in 2000, translated by 2001 into English, and only then made available in Korean, this border-crossing memoir would belatedly “return” to South Korea in decidedly cosmopolitan trappings.

Yet NED’s patronage of Kang’s story reaches back further. First featured in a special 1998 North Korean gulag issue of NED’s journal of Democracy (published by Johns Hopkins University Press), Kang’s testimony would assume full-fledged memoir form a mere two years later, suggesting, to
build on Onishi’s account, collaboration between NED and South Korea’s National Intelligence Service (formerly KCIA) in the fostering of North Korean defector arts and letters. Not just shepherded to realization, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* is a composite text whose ultimate authorship is troublingly difficult to ascertain. This indeterminacy suggests that “North Korean” second culture, as a midwived articulation in a dominant world-literary tongue, presumes no autonomy of its speaking subject. Of the ventriloquism typical of North Korean “dissident” expression, NED president Gershman offers a gradualist explanation: “Eventually the North Korean people will find their own voice and shape their own future; until then, may our solidarity give them the hope to carry on.” Not merely told to but substantially authored by Rigoulot, a fervent proponent of regime change who penned the North Korea chapter in *The Black Book of Communism* (1997), “Kang’s” memoir is a hybrid, multivocal text. In a 2009 international conference on North Korean human rights, Rigoulot offered this insight into his agenda: “Above all we [in the West] have to prepare the fall of any totalitarian state [by] help[ing] those inside prepare this fall.” Unable, however, to foster a samizdat literature inside North Korea, Rigoulot instead was assigned by the International Organization for Human Rights to work closely with Kang in Seoul—his mission to get the North Korean “renegade” to “tell the Western world what it was like to live under the rule of Kim Il-sung and his son, Kim Jong-il.”

Far from seamless, *The Aquariums of Pyongyang* bears conspicuous signs of this collaboration. The first-person memoir is littered throughout with incongruous references: an obscure French appellation for Jeju Island, “Quellepart”; the tribulations of the legendary French felon “Henry [sic] Carrère [Charrière] (aka Papillon)”; the post–World War II departure of Armenians from the Port of Marseilles to the Soviet Union; the chauvinism of “Armenians from France”; the children’s stories of Alphonse Daudet; to name a few—cultural allusions that less convincingly imply the cosmopolitanism of Kang’s gwalliso education than point to the heaviness of Rigoulot’s hand in the narration. Indeed, these casual yet jarring references, all of which bespeak Rigoulot’s authorship of the text, symptomatically attest to how thoroughly reception in the West conditions and structures, in advance,
the very utterance of the North Korean defector memoir, conscripting it to postsocialist ends.

**The Roots of Rescue**

In *Still Life with Rice* (1997), a first-person “memoir” of her grandmother’s life that pairs with *In the Absence of Sun* (2002), an account of her mission to rescue her relatives from North Korea, Korean American writer Helie Lee ventriloquizes her grandmother’s voice as a means of conveying her life story. Through this belabored intersubjective conceit, Lee describes the pain of her grandmother’s decades-long separation from her eldest son, Lee Yong Woon. Separated from his family during the tumultuous exodus of the Christian, landowning, and collaborationist elite—a southward migration triggered by the North Korean revolution—Lee’s uncle had been given up for lost by his family members in the United States, inaccessible “behind the iron curtain” until, as Lee recalls, a letter from his daughter, Ae Ran, unexpectedly arrived in the mail.98 Presented as a translated inset-text at the memoir’s close, Ae Ran’s letter attests to the limited but not impossible avenues of interaction, through personal correspondence and travels to Pyongyang, between Korean Americans and their North Korean relatives. Addressed to “Uncle,” Lee’s grandmother’s third son, Ae Ran’s warm and inquisitive letter describes the joy of Yong Woon’s family to learn that Uncle’s family is “alive and well.”99 “Please try to visit us in North Korea,” Ae Ran writes, adding, “I’m sure that it will be a great experience for you to step on the soil of the forbidden fatherland.”100

While Lee’s Korean American roots narrative, *Still Life with Rice*, closes with Ae Ran’s open invitation to Lee’s family to reunite with Yong Woon and the other members of their extended family in North Korea—sparking a hope in the first-person narrator (Lee ventriloquizing her grandmother) that “unification is possible!”101—her follow-up memoir, *In the Absence of Sun*, forecloses any return to her ancestral homeland. The ebullient quest for roots that we encounter in *Still Life with Rice* has devolved, in *In the Absence of Sun*, into a grim tale of rescue. Subscribing to a human rights metanarrative of North Korean liberation, Lee, who has served on the Board of Direc-
tors of the right-wing US Committee for North Korean Human Rights, closes her second memoir with the following ringing declaration: “By sharing my family’s story with you, I hope to shine a bright light on North Korea’s obscene dictatorship and what happens to people’s humanity under such a regime.” Speaking before the US Senate in June 2002, Lee shared her family saga as a way of calling attention to the plight of North Korean refugees. Her uncle Yong Woon and his family, she testified, were “the lucky few” in that “they had us [their Korean American family] to guide and support them. We were willing to risk our own lives to save theirs.” In her congressional testimony, Lee credited not only her immediate family’s heroic will to action with winning her North Korean relatives “their freedom” but also, more specifically, the “American publication of Still Life with Rice, which told the story of [her] grandmother’s separation from her [North Korean] son.” Yet Lee’s self-aggrandizing account of her role in rescuing her relatives from the perils of North Korea revises the much more troubling narrative presented in her second memoir, which I discuss in detail below. Her ascription of liberatory potential to Still Life with Rice accordingly bears careful scrutiny. Not simply a genealogical retracing of her family’s North Korean origins, Still Life with Rice, in Lee’s revisionist account, somehow helped to free her North Korean relatives. Leading by way of example, Lee urged decisive congressional action. Her own triumph in rescuing her relatives was a sure sign, she proclaimed, that America, as “a leader of human rights, a great generous nation,” could “save . . . tens and [sic] thousands of refugees” who deserve “life, liberty, and dignity” from “the most closed off and repressed regime in the world.”

As with Kang Chol Hwan, Soon Ok Lee, Kim Yong, and Shin Dong Hyuk—all prominent North Korean defectors whose gwalliso memoirs were published in English (originally, in some cases) and whose testimonies as survivors of North Korean brutality were solicited for or cited in the congressional record—Lee, too, was invited to deliver a grim account of life under North Korean tyranny before the US Senate, but in her instance, from the rescue side of things. If the testimony of defectors has crystallized the labor camp as a synecdoche for North Korea in US legislative circles in the post-9/11 era, then the “human rights” advocacy of Korean Americans like Lee has helped to lay the groundwork for the prospect of renewed
US intervention on the Korean peninsula. Within the *longue durée* of the unending Korean War, post-9/11, largely evangelical Korean American activism around North Korean “liberation” has breathed new life into the Cold War specter of the Asian American model minority as an anticommunist subject. Wielding human rights discourse along counterrevolutionary, US exceptionalist lines in their case for US intervention north of the DMZ, anticommunist Korean Americans have served, alongside NED-funded North Korean defectors, as troubling spokespeople for North Korea. As prototypes of a US-aligned democracy-to-come in North Korea—effectively deputized in arenas of US power to speak in lieu of official representatives of the “rogue” nation—these Korean Americans adduce the merits of prior US intervention in Korea by dint of their very existence. In hearings that preceded and followed the passage of the North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004, a bill North Korea likened to a declaration of war, Lee’s testimony before Congress in fact functioned as the most sustained account of intervention writ small. Not only did her story broadcast the support of Korean American separated families for a US interventionist policy toward North Korea, but also, as a circuitous product of the mid-century “liberation” of South Korea from the forces of global communism, Lee could attest firsthand to the virtues of US democracy.

In her appeal to Congress to admit North Korean “refugees” to the United States, Lee offered less a descriptive than a prescriptive portrait of North Korea. Central to her remarks before the Senate was her incapacity to envision North Korea in presentist, much less empirical, terms. Albeit a point of origin for her family, North Korea was overdetermined, in her account, as that grim unreality whose association with mass suffering and death required resolute external measures to ensure its obsolescence. Yet it is worth considering how this bleak imagination of North Korea is inextricable from apocalyptic policy recommendations aimed at ushering in the country’s purified postsocialist future. Indeed, dystopian human rights accounts of North Korea invite a spectrum of securitized responses, be they economic sanctions, withholding of food aid to prompt a so-called Pyongyang Spring, and even war or militarized humanitarian intervention, whose risks and violent consequences are displaced onto the very people such solutions purport to help. This is to observe the constitutive causal fallacy that
plagues North Korean human rights critique and unmask its perverse and perilous nature—namely, the human rights victims in question, the North Korean people, figure as the potential collateral damage of the solutions elaborated and proposed on their behalf.

This dark dimension of the rescue politics that profess to strive for the “liberation” of the North Korean people gives the lie to the humanitarianism of the North Korean human rights project. As an allegory of intervention writ small, Lee’s *In the Absence of Sun* can be read against the grain as registering the murkiness of North Korean rescue as a humanitarian enterprise. Indeed, it bears untangling the heroic narrative of self-sacrifice and rescue that Lee delivered before Congress from the much more disquieting account that she presents in her second memoir. Told in her first-person voice rather than that of her grandmother, *In the Absence of Sun* begins where *Still Life with Rice* left off—with the epistolary exchange between the American and North Korean branches of her family and the looming prospect of reunion with Yong Woon in North Korea. As Lee’s family prepares for a visit to their land of origin, suddenly “the doors slam . . . shut,” much to the devastation of Lee’s aging grandmother who longs to see her son before her death.106 As to the reasons for North Korea’s refusal to grant her family and other Korean Americans guest visas, Lee speculates, “It seemed that North Korea had become upset with the stories and the bad press that were circulating at the time. They probably didn’t want the world to know about the slums and poverty. In a socialist society they weren’t supposed to exist.”107 North Korea’s suspension of guest visas in 1993 and Yong Woon and his family’s exodus from North Korea and eventual resettlement in the South in 1997 form bookends to *In the Absence of Sun*. In this interval, Lee embarks on a series of adventures and misadventures that form the convoluted rescue arc of her narrative. Nowhere, however, does Lee account for the complex concatenation of historical events that precipitated the crisis North Korea faced at this juncture—the fall of the socialist bloc, the consequent disappearance of concessionary fuel and fertilizer from China and the Soviet Union, Kim Il Sung’s passing, floods of biblical proportions brought on by torrential storms, and the slowness of the international community in responding to the famine that ensued, for starters. Instead, Lee naturalizes
North Korea, in transhistorical terms, as a land of “decay, dirt, and disrepair.” More penal colony than country, North Korea, in Lee’s account, reveals its truth at its border with China where “armed soldiers” are trained to “shoot down anyone who [tries] to escape.” In her congressional testimony, Lee added, with no attempt at substantiation, that these soldiers, whom she and her family were able to bribe, were “eager to shoot.” Having arranged to meet her uncle Yong Woon at the border, Lee describes herself having to shout her greetings to him from the Chinese side. Recalling this near-reunion before Congress, Lee stated that “if discovered, he would be convicted of treason and his entire family, including young children and the elderly, severely punished.”

So how do we explain the shift from the celebratory prospect of Korean reunification that closes Still Life with Rice to Lee’s strident advocacy against the North Korean government? To be clear, it is neither the horrific famine that North Korea suffered in the 1990s nor even her fear that Yong Woon and his family would be incarcerated because of his trip to the border that ultimately compels Lee and her family to finance the spiriting of their relatives out of North Korea. Rather, Lee’s decision is prompted by the ominous words of a broker, a shady character who—eager to sell his trafficking services to her family—requests a meeting with her in South Korea. Hazily described in In the Absence of Sun, this broker states to her, “You’ve plastered Lee Yong Woon-ssi’s picture and real name on a book sold all over South Korea and America. The wide publicizing of your family’s story makes Pyongyang look bad.” Whether or not there is genuine cause for alarm, Lee describes the words of this man—whom she thereafter refers to as “the guide”—as hitting her at gut-level:

Why had I used Yong Woon Uncle’s real name in my book? Why had I circulated Ae Ran’s letter at the end? It had never occurred to me that what I was writing was unsafe. Other people had written about North Korea. If I had known the whole story, I wouldn’t have included the letter and the real names, but the fact was, I hadn’t known about the concentration camps, the killings. I thought I could do some good by drawing attention to the plight of war-torn families. Instead I had led the authorities right to my family.
As she would subsequently state before Congress, by publishing her uncle’s name and reproducing Ae Ran’s letter in her first memoir, Lee had “alerted North Korea’s . . . leadership to the identity of [her] relatives in a nation where it was best to remain invisible.” Gripped by the fear that her North Korea relatives will be relocated as punishment for merely being mentioned in her book, Lee comes to grips with the realization that “there was no other option,” as she would testify before Congress, than to initiate the rescue of her North Korean family. Yet the danger Yong Woon and his family purportedly face is far from clear.

In *Still Life with Rice*, Lee admittedly exposes the counterrevolutionary class origins of her maternal family as Christian landlords during the Japanese colonial era who oversaw “a large empire of opium” in Manchu-kuo, thereby enabling them “to return to their home in North Korea and purchase land as far as the eye can see.” Moreover, she reveals her class bias in her description of North Korea’s implementation of land reform as “persecution” of the landowning class by “the Reds.” Yet, even as Andrei Lankov notes, “it would be a minor exaggeration to say that any piece of well located flat land in North Korea has a potential claimant lying in wait, somewhere in Seoul” or, we might add, the United States, *Still Life with Rice* ultimately reads as a separated family narrative. If colored throughout by generic anticommunist phobia, Lee’s first memoir, in theory, could be understood as part of a growing Korean North American cultural archive of literary and filmic texts that address the painful costs of decades-long family separation and the trauma of the unending Korean War—including JT Tagaki and Christine Choy’s film *Homes Apart: Korea*, Vana Kim’s film *Sacred Mission*, Peter Han’s film *Peter Han’s Visit to Pyongyang*, Jason Ahn and Eugene Chung’s film *Divided Families*, Deann Borshay Liem and Ramsay Liem’s art exhibit *Still Present Pasts*, and Borshay Liem and Liem’s film *Memory of Forgotten War*. None of the aforementioned films, however, endeavors to conceal the names of North Korean family members, and many contain explicit documentary footage of family reunions in North Korea. In contrast to these cultural texts, which envision family reconciliation as a precipitating dynamic of peace, *In the Absence of Sun* situates the drama of rescue—of isolated reconciliation—agonistically against the very existence of North Korea.
Revealingly, from the point that Lee and her family hire the smuggler to transport her uncle Yong Woon and his family across multiple national borders to South Korea—necessitating communication with the intelligence services of both South Korea and the United States—she undertakes a hasty self-guided tutorial on North Korea. Convinced she must study the “force [she] would be dealing with,” Lee delves into an array of reading materials whose possible bias or geopolitical agenda she appears to give no thought to: defector testimonies, articles from the conservative South Korean newspaper Chosun Ilbo, an Amnesty International human rights report on the North Korean gwalliso system, for starters.117 The corpus of information, which she consumes “voraciously,” prompts Lee to conclude she is “up against an alien world.”118 Her dawning realization that North Korea is “extremely dangerous” reinforces her sense of urgency in liberating her relatives from the darkness north of the DMZ.119 Reflecting back on her own heroic role in winning her relatives their freedom, Lee confesses, in her congressional testimony, that “everyday I am filled with guilt remembering those we could not save.”120

Nowhere in her remarks before Congress, however, does Lee mention the strange actual thesis of In the Absence of Sun—namely, her conviction that the Korean publication of Still Life with Rice imperiled the well-being of her North Korean relatives. Persuaded by the broker that mere mention of her relatives by name renders them vulnerable to the predation of the North Korean state, Lee manages to make contact with her uncle Yong Woon, who rejects her rescue scheme out of hand. As she would convey before Congress, the most thorny impediment to her “family’s daring mission to rescue my uncle and eight members of his family from North Korea” was their perplexing unwillingness to leave: “We had gravely underestimated the power of Kim Il Sung. Half of my uncle’s family was so indoctrinated that they could not bring themselves to betray their ‘Great Leader.’ They clung onto the belief that their ‘Great Leader’ would somehow provide for them.”121

In her book, Lee describes the slow and painful process of deprogramming required to undo her relatives’ acceptance of “their party’s ideology”: “It was going to take some time for them . . . to understand what freedom really meant.”122 Only upon being shown the Korean translation of Still Life
with Rice does Yong Woon finally relent: “My name, my wife’s name, my children’s names, workplace, and so on . . . all these things are out in the open all over the world.”¹²³ Like the tolling of a bell of doom, references to Lee’s first memoir emerge as shorthand for the peril Lee Yong-Woon and his family face. Punctuating In the Absence of Sun, these recurring allusions to the impact of Still Life with Rice—what Lee contends is its “deadly domino effect”—and the supposedly imminent, punitive response of the North Korean government to her book’s international reception are essential to the dramatic tension of the rescue mission described therein.¹²⁴ Furnishing the very basis for narrative momentum—life-altering decisions, abandonment of home, multiple border crossings—Lee’s mention of her relatives by name in her first memoir drives the action of the second. Meant to illustrate the tyranny, irrationality, and totalitarian nature of North Korea where anonymity means survival—so much so that merely being named in a Korean American memoir signals certain persecution—these serial invocations to Still Life with Rice, on an almost allegorical level, instead bring to view an unintended truth: the responsibility of the rescuer in occasioning the crisis at hand.

Lee’s two-part memoir, half roots, half rescue, raises the troubling question of the role of proxy cultural texts, or what NED calls “second culture,” in the deterritorialization of North Korea. Even as such writings perform a speaking of truth to power, these axis-of-evil literary texts—as postsocialist counterconstructions of North Korea—are themselves articulations of power staged on asymmetrical geopolitical terrain. In the lead-up to the passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act, legislation that legitimized anew a US interventionist posture toward North Korea, Kang Chol Hwan’s narrative of survival in a North Korea’s “gulag” and Helie Lee’s heroic tale of North Korean rescue were mobilized as urgent exposures of the evils of the North Korean state. Yet, against the uncritical ascription of self-evident truth to these writings, we might ask what “North Korean” second culture actually reflects. If situated within the geopolitical contours of the unending Korean War, these texts, as proxies for a US-aligned democracy-to-come in North Korea, bespeak discomfiting truths about the value of soft cultural weapons within a US human rights arsenal. Not simply indictments of North Korea or heroic narratives of escape and rescue—geopolitical emplotments that position the United States in virtu-
ous relationship to North Korea—Kang’s and Lee’s contemporary Korean War texts must be read, I contend, for their equivocal role in a “second culture” whose ultimate referent is less North Korea per se than a murky history of US interventionism.

Notes

I would like to thank the members of the 2012 “Between Life and Death: Necropolitics in an Era of Late Capitalism” residential research group at the University of California Humanities Research Institute (UCHRI) for having graciously read and offered feedback on this essay.


3. Allen Hertzke writes:

One center of mobilization on southern Sudan was Midland, Texas, hometown of George W. and Laura Bush. Spearheading the effort there was Deborah Fikes, leader of the Midland Ministerial Alliance. An ardent evangelical, she worked with her husband to create an organization to support the ministry of sister churches in Sudan. As friends of the president, Fikes and her associates understood their special leverage, which they exercised judiciously. When Bush officials offered conciliatory messages about Sudan’s cooperation in the war on terror after the attacks of September 11, the alliance sent a strong letter to the president. Stating that they would have to “stand with our brothers and sisters in Sudan, however God leads us,” the group conveyed to White House officials that, at some point, the president’s Midland friends might be compelled to take actions that could embarrass him (Allen D. Hertzke, “The Shame of Darfur,” First Things, October 2005, www.firstthings.com/print.php?type=article&year=2007&month=01&title_link=the-shame-of-darfur-4).

The Alliance, which is a network of churches from Bush’s Texas hometown, has used its clout to help secure passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act through Congress. The act provides substantial grants to aid programs promoting the protection of human rights in North Korea. The Alliance has additionally embarked on a campaign to induce the U.S. government to potentially slap tariffs of up to twenty-seven percent on Chinese imports should Beijing repatriate North Korean refugees back across the Sino-North Korean border (Joey Long, “Religion and U.S. Foreign Policy,” *IDSS Commentaries*, October 31, 2005, 2).


6. It is worth noting that Tatiana Gabroussenko’s study of “North Korean literature and literary policy,” *Soldiers on the Cultural Front* (2010), which borrows its framing account from Robert Scalapino and Chong-Sik Lee’s assessment of “the cultural life of North Korea” as “a great desert of unalleviated mediocrity and monotony,” gestures beyond the stasis of this evaluation in its conclusion, hinting at the theoretical existence of a “heretical” (1) alternative. Conceding, however, that “we have no information about underground literature,” Gabroussenko speculates that samizdat “possibly exists in some form in North Korea despite the rigid control” (174). See Tatiana Gabroussenko, *Soldiers on the Cultural Front: Developments in the Early History of North Korean Literature and Literary Policy* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2010), 1. In their prefatory note to *Literature from the “Axis of Evil”: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations* (2006), the Words without Borders editors write, “In the case of North Korea, our initial expectation of finding ‘samizdat’ literature turned out to be naïve; all we could find was in fact propaganda literature. In North Korea, it seems there are not only things that must not be said, but every work must in the end praise the Great Leader or it never sees the light of day.” See also “Editors’ Note,” *Literature from the “Axis of Evil”: Writing from Iran, Iraq, North Korea, and Other Enemy Nations*, ed. Words without Borders (New York: The New Press, 2006), xix.

7. Consider in this regard the uncritical use of defectors’ memoirs as “primary data” (29)—with no attempt at discourse analysis—in Hee Young Lee and Jurg Gerber’s study of


9. The Senate Intelligence Committee Report, released in July 2004, includes the following conclusions about intelligence failures and the Iraq War: “Conclusion 78. The Intelligence Community depended too heavily on defectors and foreign government services to obtain human intelligence (HUMINT) information on Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction activities. Because the Intelligence Community did not have direct access to many of these sources, it was exceedingly difficult to determine source credibility” and “Conclusion 82. BLACKED OUT. The lack of in-country human intelligence (HUMINT) collection assets contributed to this collection gap.” See “Senate Intelligence Committee Reports: On Homeland Security,” www.ontheissues.org/Archive/Senate_Intel_Homeland_Security.htm (accessed June 2, 2010).


14. By “securitized,” I mean to follow Hazel Smith’s analysis of the dominant policy approach to North Korea, which “remains heavily coloured by a security perspective which is . . . curiously old-fashioned in its reliance upon the use and potential of military force as the central analytical notion in foreign policy behaviour.” See Hazel Smith, “Bad, Mad, Sad, or Rational Actor? Why the ‘Securitization’ Paradigm Makes for Poor Policy Analysis of North Korea,” International Affairs 76, no. 3 (2000): 593. It is worth considering how defector testimony was mobilized in the US Senate in the run-up to the passage of the 2004 North Korean Human Rights Act. Andrew Natsios, then-administrator of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), stated in a hearing before the Senate Subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs on June 5, 2003, “I am convinced, if you really want
to find out what is going on [in North Korea], you need to talk to defectors and refugees.”
Natsios goes on to recommend “two recent books [that] provide graphic explanations of
deplorable conditions in the more ‘lenient’ reeducation camps”: “Aquariums of Pyongyang
[ sic ] by Kang chol-Hwan [ sic ] and Eyes of Tailless Animals [ sic ] by Soon Ok Lee. Torture
is widespread along with gradual starvation from the minimal food rations.” See “Life
t08shrg89499/html/CHRG-108shrg89499.htm.
16. Steven I. Levine, “Some Reflections on the Korean War,” in Remembering the “Forgot-
ten War”: The Korean War through Literature and Art, ed. Philip West and Suh Ji-Moon
(Armonk, NY: East Gate-M.W. Sharpe, 2001), 9. The quotation that Levine refers to comes
from Innokentii Volodin in Solzhenitsyn’s novel, The First Circle: “A great writer is, so to
speak, a second government. That is why no regime has ever loved its great writers, only its
minor ones.” See Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, The First Circle, trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New
18. It is worth considering the controversy around Shin Dong-hyuk’s admission in January
2015 that he falsified part of his dramatic tale of survival and escape from a North Korean
“total-control zone,” a story that would be published in Escape from Camp 14: One Man’s
Remarkable Odyssey, a biography that he coauthored with US journalist Blaine Harden.
February 20, 2000, search.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/WPlate/2000-02/20/076l-022000-
idx.html (site discontinued). Jasper Becker offers a standard, uncritical account of the label:
“The term ‘rogue state’ is reserved only for the most incorrigible in the international system.
Rogue states engage in rash behavior, subjugate their populations, are hostile to the ideolo-
gies and interests of the free world, and, most troublingly, breach established international
rules in many areas: diplomacy, trade, terrorism, human rights, dangerous weapons, narc-
ocics, and so on.” See Jasper Becker, Rogue Regime: Kim Jong Il and the Looming Threat of
Two Turns,” trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Nass, South Atlantic Quarterly 103,
22. Randall Williams, The Divided World: Human Rights and Its Violence (Minneapolis: Univer-
sity of Minnesota Press, 2010), xx.
23. Wendy Brown, “‘The Most We Can Hope For . . .’: Human Rights and the Politics of Fatal-
24. Jacques Rancière, “Who Is the Subject of the Rights of Man?,” South Atlantic Quarterly 103,
25. Brown, “‘Most We Can Hope For’,” 453.
28. Brown, “‘Most We Can Hope For’,” 453.
31. Ibid., 157, 86.
36. Ibid.
37. Horn, “Knowing the Enemy,” 63.
38. Ibid. Consider, as well, the following unsavory portrait of “defectors” that emphasizes non-political reasons for defection: “The physical act of seeking political asylum in an adversary’s country is known as defection, and the perpetrators may be motivated by self-preservation, ideology, resentment, a personal or professional crisis, or some other psychological factor. . . . Although almost all [defectors] to Moscow and the United States during the Cold War subsequently espoused political or ideological motivations for the defections, their personal circumstances were invariably complicated by adverse personal, family, or professional factors which could be remedied or improved by the lure of exchanging valuable information for resettlement.” See Nigel West, *Historical Dictionary of Cold War Counterintelligence* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), 80.
39. I borrow the term *deterritorialization* from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s discussion of Franz Kafka’s relation to Yiddish “less as a linguistic territoriality for Jews than as a movement of nomadic deterritorialization for German.” Yet, whereas Deleuze and Guattari see “the literary machine . . . as the relay for a future revolutionary machine” precisely because what they call “minor literature” furnishes “a collective utterance, missing everywhere else in the milieu,” the defector memoir does not “find” or name “the zones of linguistic third-worlds.” See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “What Is a Minor Literature?,” trans. Robert Brinkley, *Mississippi Review* 11, no. 3 (1983): 25, 27.
41. Ibid., viii, ix, xi–xii.
43. It is worth noting Kang’s disavowal on this point: bristling at the insinuation from South Korean progressive media that he contrived parts of his story with the assistance of South Korean intelligence agencies, Kang, in the preface to the revised 2005 version of his memoir, insists, “I risked my life and fled North Korea . . . in order to expose to the world the unimaginable crimes [of] . . . the Pyongyang regime.” Kang, “Preface,” viii.


45. Onishi, “Campaigning for Human Rights.”


53. Ibid.

54. Inside North Korea (National Geographic Video, 2007), 52 min.


56. The oft-cited statistic of 150,000–200,000 political prisoners in North Korea can be sourced to a single defector, Ahn Myung-Chol, former prison guard at the Yodok labor prison. In subsequent years, Ahn inflated this statistic to 900,000. Author’s e-mail correspondence with the US State Department, 2009.


58. Ibid., 313, 314.

59. Arguing that “it is important to understand that North Koreans are starving not because of a lack of aid from South Korea or the US, but because they are deprived of freedom,” Kang
argued that “aid [dollars were] diverted to the military and other power organs, reviving them and helping them to consolidate their power.” Critiquing “the Sunshine Policy” of liberal South Korean administrations as a form of appeasement, Kang further asserted, “Now is not the time to give aid, or to agree to bilateral negotiations between the U.S. and North Korea.” See Kang, “Give Us an Eclipse Policy,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 13, 2005. For a countervailing view, it should be remarked that the World Food Program, the longest-standing UN program in the DPRK (operating in-country since 1996) has extensively monitored the food distribution system on the ground and disputes allegations that North Korea has diverted food aid “to the military and other power organs.” It should also be noted that defectors have been at the forefront of calling upon South Korea, the United States, and the rest of the global community to halt food aid to North Korea. See, for example, Heejin Koo and Jason Gale, “Kim Jong Il Diverts Global Food Aid to Military, Defectors Say,” *Bloomberg.com*, June 3, 2008, www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=newsarchive&sid=acZu7Dojt8NA&refer=latin_america. See also “Many in North Korea Don't [sic] Know Food Aid Gets Diverted,” *Radio Free Asia* online, January 11, 2004, www.rfa.org/english/news/125428-20040111.html; Lee Jung Hoon, “Hanguk jiwon ssal, wae bukhangun-I gajyeogana” (“Why North Korean Armed Forces Take Rice Aid Donated by South Korea”), dongA.com, December 7, 2006, www.donga.com/fbin/output?f=total&n=200609050369&top20=1; and William Ide, “US Lawmakers Voice Concern Over North Korea Food Aid,” *VOANews.com*, March 10, 2011, www.voanews.com/english/news/asia/US-Lawmakers-Voice-Concern-Over-North-Korea-Food-Aid-117762988.html. It also merits mentioning that the *Wall Street Journal* editors saw fit to append the following correction to Kang’s op-ed: “Kang Cho-Hwan did not escape from a North Korean gulag, as was stated in the author identification of this article; he and his family were released after 10 years of imprisonment, and he later escaped to China.”

60. Kang, “Give Us an Eclipse Policy.”


67. As Don Kirk notes, the “prime conduits” of funding for defector media broadcasting aimed at “their brethren in the North” are “the State Department and the National Endowment for Democracy.” He writes:

NED calls itself a “private non-profit foundation” but is “funded largely by the U.S. Congress,” was “created jointly by Republicans and Democrats,” and is “governed by a board balanced between both parties” while enjoying “congressional support across the political spectrum.” NED makes a point of transparency, listing precisely how much it gives each year to each beneficiary. The figures for 2009 included $150,000 each for Free North Korea Radio, Open Radio for North Korea and Radio Free Chosun and $175,000 for NK Communications to produce North Korea Reform Radio. In keeping with its “belief that freedom is a universal human aspiration that can be realized through the development of democratic institutions, procedures, and values,” NED definitely has a monopoly on encouraging the nongovernmental flow of information into North Korea. Daily NK got $145,000; Kim Sang-hun’s Database Center, $80,000, and Imjingang Publishing, publisher of Imjingang, a quarterly journal named for the Imjin River that flows from North to South Korea to the Yellow Sea, got $85,000 “for North Korean citizens to share information and opinions about North Korean culture, economics, politics, and other developments.” The magazine features reports by North Koreans who have smuggled themselves, and their material, out of the country.


74. Ibid.


76. Michael A. Turner writes, “Black propaganda has been a potent instrument in the CIA’s arsenal since its inception. Beginning at the onset of the Cold War, the CIA infiltrated Western literature into the totalitarian regimes of the eastern bloc; sponsored anticommunist books written by Soviet and eastern bloc defectors as well as by American scholars; and developed media proprietaries abroad, including a secret propaganda printing plant in West Germany and various press outlets, such as the West German *Der Monat*, the British *Encounter*, and the Italian *Daily American.*” See Michael A. Turner, “Covert Action: An Appraisal of the Effects of Secret Propaganda,” in *Strategic Intelligence: Behind the Veils of Secret Foreign Policy*, vol. 3, ed. Loch K. Johnson (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 112.


78. Carl Gershman, “Statement,” 1. According to NED program officer Lynn Lee, by spring of 2012, eleven NED-funded international conferences had been held in ten countries. On the efficacy of South Korean and US radio broadcasts transmitted into North Korea, Kang Chol Hwan claims that many North Koreans tune into these contraband programs: “We liked listening to the Christian programs on the Korean Broadcasting System. The message of love and respect for one’s fellow man was sweet as honey to us. It was so different from what we were used to hearing. In North Korea, the state-run radio and television, newspapers, teachers, and even comic strips only tried to fill us with hate—for the imperialists, the class enemies, the traitors, and who knows what else! We could also tune in to the Voice of America and catch up on the international news from which we had been severed for so long. We hungered for a discourse to break the monopoly of lies. . . . Radio programs from the South made it possible for us to sharpen our criticisms of Kim Il-sung’s regime.” See Kang and Rigoulot, *Aquariums of Pyongyang*, 185–86.


80. Ibid., 2, 4.


82. Lee, conference presentation.


85. Ibid.
91. Brooke, “Voice from North Korea.”
92. In her preface, for example, to Kim Yong’s gwallyso memoir—a work that she helped foster—Suk-Young Kim gives this account of their collaborative writing process: “When I started transcribing the recorded interviews, I had to make a conscious decision: how to negotiate between the commitment to faithfully capture Kim’s cadence and voice and the impulse to embellish his story with literary flair. I discussed this very issue with Kim Yong many times, and we concluded that it would be best to transcribe Kim’s story from the original interviews, with minimal dramatization or stylistic alteration.” Yet even as she indicates that she adopted a faithful approach to Kim Yong’s testimony, Kim makes reference to “the stylistic platitude embedded in the narrative alternating with more literary trimming” as “a specific choice I made as transcriber of Kim Yong’s recorded narrative.” See Suk-Young Kim, preface to Long Road Home: Testimony of a North Korean Camp Survivor, by Kim Yong (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), ix, x.
94. In a statement before the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee on June 5, 2003, Andrew Natsios, then-administrator of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), concluded his account of the human rights abuses of the North Korean regime by recommending Kang’s “powerful [and] riveting book.” In Natsios’s description, Kang’s memoir was “written by a French human rights specialist but dictated by this young man who spent 10 years with his family in the gulag.”
100. Ibid.
101. Ibid., 320.
104. The North Korean Human Rights Act of 2004 (HR 4011) contained an explicit provision, Section 303, directing the secretary of state “to facilitate the submission of refugee applications by citizens of North Korea.” Thus far, only a handful of North Koreans have legally resettled in the United States, and an unspecified number have crossed over via Canada and Mexico.
105. North Korea’s reading is not far-fetched, given the often-explicit policy discussion of the refugee provisions in the bill as a means of triggering regime collapse. Karin Lee and Adam Miles write, “According to Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, one of the refugee provisions in the bill was designed to stimulate a ‘critical mass of refugees’ into leaving the country. Such an exodus, he said, would result in an ‘East European [or] Soviet Union [type of] implosion of the regime. Given the explicit links made by Horowitz, it is not surprising that some members of Congress and their staff saw the bill as a thinly veiled call for regime change.” See Karin Lee and Adam Miles, “North Korea on Capitol Hill,” *Asian Perspective* 28, no. 4 (2004): 198.
107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 1.
109. Ibid.
110. Lee, testimony.
111. *Absence of Sun*, 64.
112. Ibid., 71.
113. See Lee, testimony.
115. Ibid.
118. Ibid., 103.
119. Ibid.
120. Lee, testimony.
121. Ibid.
123. Ibid., 183.
124. Ibid., 274.