

Kim, Eunjung (2017). *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. ISBN 978-0-8223-6288-3

Reviewed by Yoonmee Han

Opening her book *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea* (2016) with a discussion of Hwang Wook-suk's infamous 2005 embryonic stem cell scandal, EunJung Kim directs readers to a critical conversation about the imperatives of cure in the cultural narratives in South Korea. The analysis of Hwang's scandal, along with the author's examination of the concert stage performance of Kang Won Rae – a Korean celebrity with a disability, and Christopher Reeve's performed drama of bodily transformation from his spinal cord injury into the projected future in which his non-disabled holographic body was shown walking in a Superbowl commercial invites readers into the further problematization of the “curative spectacle”(p.2) that reveals how social, political, emotional, and economic drama related to curing disability also fit together with “nationalist spectacle” (p.2). The book contends that cure is neither merely medical nor is it an individual choice, but rather a cultural phenomenon as it occurs as a form of violence – as Kim terms it, “curative violence” (p.10). The imperatives of cure are problematic because discourses around the need to cure disabled people reinforce the narrow thinking that posits disability as a problem to be fixed at all cost for the collective betterment of society. These narratives also overlook other complications of cure including associated costs, harms, and risks and potentially damaging impacts on people with disabilities.

The book employs temporal and inventive conceptual tools such as “curative violence”, “folding time” and the “time machine” that are used to theorize the cultural desire to erase the presence of disability from the present time. Also, these frameworks help to elucidate the fact that, in this cultural context, disability is only represented as wanting to be normalized in the future. Kim's conceptual tools,

“curative violence” and “folding time”, along with her narrative analysis of cultural dramas, assess the narrow cultural imaginary of disability that repeatedly construes the lives of people with disability as so tragic that it is better for them to be dead. In this construction, disability exists only as suffering in the present time frame, necessitating collective members’ struggles and endeavours in pursuit of curing disability for a better future. In other words, under the imperatives of cure, disabled people are depicted as worthless unless being situated in a temporal position of yet-to-be-cured. Kim’s analysis of Korean literature and the cinematic adoption of the story, “Adada, an Idiot” (1935), *Adada*, (1987) and the analysis of the film *Address Unknown* (2001) shows readers that the lives of disabled people are painted with the same brush, and are depicted as unbearable because of sexual violence and emotional pain that results from being excluded and ostracized from family and local communities; disability or what is often characterized as physical or mental abnormality is thought to be the naturalized cause of those maltreatments.

These critiques of Korea’s cultural representations point to the fact that the imperatives of cure preclude any possibility of people with disabilities’ being acknowledged as equal subjects who have rights to negotiate through a verity of means of cure and other forms of access for resources and social services to pursue a fulfilling life. Also, importantly, according to Kim’s theorization of cure and disability, the coercion of cure is premised upon the categorization of disability as ‘otherness’ which is constructed as a counterpart of non-disabled and perfectly functioning bodies that are set as a goal, and at the same time, assumed to be attainable through the means of cure which is, nevertheless, and as Kim argues, fictional and basically grounded upon a fantasy of normalization. As Kim aptly elaborates, “so too cure keeps as its place as a destination at which one can never arrive. In that sense, for disabled people normality exists always one moment away” (p.9).

Not only is Kim's book innovative because it complicates the cultural compulsion of cure, but also because her use of a transnational feminist framework throughout enriches the analysis of Korean cultural representations. It does this by providing an inspirational tool to examine the intersectionality of disability, gender, culture, and race in relation to her linking of the narrative analysis to Korea's geopolitical situation within particular historical and transnational arrangements. Her critiques of the cultural representation of cure successfully connect ableism with the gendered nature of oppression and heteronormativity that are mutually constituting normalizing forces that shape a binary between normative subject and 'disabled others'. This reading of disability sheds light on the importance of historical and geopolitical factors in understanding disability issues, and serves as an excellent example of transnational feminist contributions to disability studies. In doing so, Kim also guides readers away from the pitfalls of cultural reductionism when discussing disability issues and violence against women in non-Western contexts, demonstrating how ableism and sexual violence intersect in a specific cultural context of normalization, and yet, at the same time, the cultural narratives are constituted under the influences of the historical and geopolitical dynamics.

The first half of this paper has pointed out the notable qualities of Kim's main arguments. In the rest of this review, I will discuss three points that emerged throughout the book.

First, Kim's analysis of a wide range of Korean culture and literature, such as folktales, films, novels, and documentaries, along with her analysis of related policies and media representations in South Korea from the 1920s to the 21st Century, helps readers to understand how gender conformity plays a key role in a normalizing process in modern Korean society, and therefore, conforming to an appropriate familial and gender role becomes an integral part of curing disability. Her analysis explores the compliancy of heteronormativity and ableism that work as a coalescing violence that attempts to solidify patriarchal and gendered orders in both pre-modern and modern Korean society and shows how

this violence manifests in the cultural imagining of disabled women's agonizing journeys and negotiations to attain normative status by being cured of disability and pursuing heterosexual relationships. Furthermore, Kim's in-depth readings of these texts open room for discussions about the misogyny that is ingrained in the Korean cultural imagination and that is intermingled with ableism as a key component in understanding the cultural representation of sexual violence against disabled people. This violence is also construed as a benevolent method to normalize disabled persons as it is framed as a 'cure', which is played out as actual violence towards disabled women in the country based on the assumption that disabled people who are deemed unfit in a patriarchal system are cast outside due to their assumed asexuality or, in other cases, their assumed hypersexuality.

Second, the book is pertinent to how disability is rhetorically deployed in the context of the particular historical and geopolitical realities in South Korea. The book elucidates that disability, imagined as a grim metaphor of national trauma, can be understood in conjunction with the formation of nationalism that is an essential part of Korean national identity. In the narratives of the various fictional examples, the presence of disability is metaphorized as national anguish from history and becomes an epitome of the adversity and national wounds incurred by the history of Japanese colonization, the Korean War, atrocities under post-colonial dictatorial regimes, and the military occupation by the United States, which occurred within the geopolitical and international dynamics of the Cold War. In these cultural narratives produced by many contemporary Korean novels and films, such as "There Patel Silently Falls"(1988), *A Patel* (1996) and *Address Unknown* (2001) Kim argues that disability is signified in opposition to the normative past and ideal future of the Korean nation-state in which the removal of disability becomes equated with an overcoming of historic trauma and finally, cured disability is a symbolic advancement of the nation's departure from past injuries towards a victorious and independent sovereign future. Moreover, her analysis of the cultural production of cure and

disability at different times successfully directs readers to the questions of how those narratives reflect shifts in socio-political rationales and approaches behind the control of disability by different methods of cure.

Finally, the book's temporal and spatial interpretations in her analysis of literatures and movies, along with related politics with regard to disability, are striking. Throughout her critiques of the narratives of cure, key thematic and geopolitical sites emerge as spaces wherein the interactions between the imposition of gender roles and heteronormativity, social relations, eugenic beliefs and "cure drama" take place. In the final chapter, Kim invites readers to an imaginative reading of temporal and spatial relations of disability, asking us to depart from a view that confines disabled people within the sites of oppression such as the family, traditional village, total institution, and xenophobic nation-state – narrativized as the primary and only places responsible for the curing, controlling, and rehabilitation of disability -- and instead look towards an imagined space in which the connotations of living as persons with disability or chronic illness are reclaimed and redefined by disability activists. Furthermore, her proposal for an imaginative reading of cure attempts to move beyond the temporal and categorical thinking of disability as an incomplete state prior to being cured based on the division between disability and non-disability by reframing cure as a process of transformation in which otherness and normality are not divided as such so that disability and cure co-exist in-betweenness. In this way, the book also serves the purpose of troubling the impulse of temporal and categorical normalization with regard to disability.