

## Interview *with Mary-Kim Arnold*

*Authors Caroline Miller and Logan Newby spoke recently with author Mary-Kim Arnold about *Litany for the Long Moment*, winner of the 2016 Essay Press book contest. Arnold is a judge for this year's contest. Arnold, Miller, and Newby discussed literary influences, innovative formal traditions, and her experiences working with Essay Press.*

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**Caroline Miller:** There are references to Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée* throughout *Litany for the Long Moment*. In *Dictée*, Cha connects herself to other women throughout history and mythology. Do you see yourself and your work as part of this lineage as well, and/or parts of another traditions?

**Mary-Kim Arnold:** I definitely see myself and my work as in conversation with Cha's *Dictée*. Part of the underlying impulse of the book was my attempt to claim "Korean-ness," and I like to think that in *Litany*, I'm keeping company with Korean and Korean American women writers whose work foregrounds complicated relationships to the prevailing public discourse. I'm reaching back to some of the earliest recorded Korean women's writing—to Lady Hyegyong, and her willingness to reveal the intimate, traumatic details of her lived experience challenged the official, sanitized record of courtly life.

In addition to Cha's connecting herself to other historical and mythological women, I think she also attempts to trouble the public understanding of the U.S. relationship to Korea, and its role in Japanese occupation (of Korea) and the oppression and attempted annihilation that regime imposed.

Suppression of language is one means of silencing. So much of what Cha discusses in *Dictée* is about the difficulties of utterance in a language that is not fully one's own. Contemporary Korean American poets Myung Mi Kim and Don Mee Choi address this in their work as well. I'm interested in the relationship between transnational adoption (and immigration or forced displacement) and the suppression or silencing of native language, and in the relationship of language to power—specifically the Korean language (as the language of the colonized) to the language of colonizer (Japan, United States).

The U.S. relationship to Korea is also part of the historical circumstance from which my adoption was made possible. By revealing intimate details of my life, I think I join those women whose documentation, whose utterance of their lived experience perhaps offers a more complicated understanding of the prevailing discourse—in my case, specifically around adoption.

There is a recognition in all these women's lives and work that there is no personal without political, that the Korean American woman exists in a politicized body, politicized state. To proceed as if otherwise is a kind of self-denial, self-abnegation. I was trying to resist this impulse toward self-erasure, too.

**Logan Newby:** One of the most poignant lines in the book reads, "I wonder if I am living my life or performing it." Did the process of writing this book help you to answer this question?

**MKA:** I don't know that the question ever will have any one answer, but I guess it makes me want to return to Francesca Woodman, who I kept in *Litany*, even through radical revisions of the manuscript, and even though there's a way in which keeping her and her work as a concern in this book sits a little more awkwardly perhaps than the other (primarily Korean and Korean-American) artists I include. It was important to me to maintain these tensions of seeing and being seen, visibility and invisibility, subject and object, that, for me, Woodman's work really keeps present—her own recognition that in her photographs and in her writing, she is constructing herself for viewing even as she is attempting to be the author of her own life, her own work. Existing between those two states, and also in both states simultaneously, for me seems to capture something of the predicament of being a woman, being an orphan, being Korean-American, being hybrid.

**CM:** Certain sections of *Litany* contain a lot of information about the history of Korean writing. I personally found the information about Lady Hyegyong's memoirs especially interesting. How much additional research did you find you had to do for this book? What was that process like?

**MKA:** There are many ways to talk about how this book began, and one way is with the question of language. I was studying poetry at the time, and the question I had was how and whether I might think about poetic forms and syntax differently if I were fluent in another language. So I decided to take introductory Korean, thinking that not only might I get some insight into the embedded cultural values and formal implications of another language, but I might also get in touch with my Korean-ness, so to speak. I had this vague notion too that since I had already started speaking Korean by the time I came to the U.S., I might have some advantage in re-learning the language. That the knowledge of it might just have been dormant, but in me, all these years.

One of the first things you learn about the Korean language is how proud Koreans tend to be of their alphabet. In reading about Hangeul, I saw some reference to it being called "women's script," because when it was introduced in the late 1400s, its usage was very popular among women, and this led me to be very curious about what the earliest women's writing in Korean might be. As a student of writing, I had been introduced to *The Pillow Book*, and wondered whether (particularly knowing about this popularity of Hangeul among women), whether any similar kind of text existed in Korean. What I found was the *Memoirs of Lady Hyegyong*.

My research branched out in a few different directions, not all of which made it into the final manuscript. From Lady Hyegyong, I followed a bit of a path to the rituals and practices of Korean courtly life, which led to learning about chok'po (traditional Korean lineage records), and to a fascinating book by a woman who married into a Korean family and traced her husband's family back for 39 generations. Another branch was research into language acquisition and the theory of "linguistic embodiment" (how we learn language through our bodily experiences), and also language loss. I found a few studies (these are all included in the references in my book) about how quickly transnationally adopted children tend to learn the language of their adoptive parents, and lose their first language—which most often is not maintained in the adoptive family.

Working on this book also led me to Eleana Kim's anthropological study of Korean adoption, which situates the practice in the political, social, and cultural aftermath of the Korean War. So, suddenly, there was a very personal, very specific reason for me to want to learn more about that war and the U.S. involvement in it.

My research was broad but not very deep. But I feel as though working on this book illuminated all these possible paths for future inquiry. In that sense, the time I've spent following these rather

unexpected paths has been exhilarating and dizzying and at times overwhelming. I learned something about my own curiosity. A lot of my war reading led to my second book, *The Fish and the Dove*, and I am working on another project now in which the Korean War figures prominently.

**LN:** Had you always envisioned incorporating photographs throughout *Litany*? Were there any works that influenced you in terms of this formal arrangement?

**MKA:** I had always envisioned incorporating photographs and documents (letters, official adoption records, etcetera), but didn't have a clear sense of how they might be used. I'd been working with these materials for a few years in different forms. When doing public readings for example, I would often show images (of myself as a child in Korea, or scenes from my trip to Korea, or images of the documents) in the background, in an attempt to express how they haunted everything I was writing and thinking about.

I knew that I didn't want the images only to function as illustrations of an idea or passage of text. In my hopes for the book, I had *Dictée* as an influence of course, but also Claudia Rankine's *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, specifically Rankine's use of the repeated, static-filled television screens as a kind of section break—the way the image operated not quite like anaphora but gesturing toward it. I knew I wanted my images to have their own life, their own poetic resonance.

But the way the book turned out really exceeded anything I could have come up with myself, and for which I owe a debt of gratitude to Essay Press editors—Aimee Harrison, who designed the layout, and Travis Sharp, who designed the cover. They were able to capture my vision for the book before I even was able to fully articulate what that vision was. I could not have asked for a better collaboration.