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**Return Migration Experiences Portrayed in K-pop  
Literature: *Somewhere Only We Know* and *Comeback:  
A K-pop Novel***

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Some Korean American youth consider ethnic “voluntary” return migration,<sup>1</sup> temporary or permanent return to their ancestral homeland where they romanticize a racial belonging (C. Park 131; K. Yoon 143). To assist them in critical thinking and decision-making when contemplating a return, K-pop-themed literature, or literature centered in the Korean pop music industry, offers a unique opportunity to demonstrate the varied experiences of Korean Americans in Korea as they are linked to Korean politics, economy, and culture.

In this article, I examine representations of return migration experiences to the Republic of Korea<sup>2</sup> in two American K-pop-themed young adult novels, *Somewhere Only We Know* (2019) by Maurene Goo and *Comeback: A K-pop Novel* (2019) by Lyn Ashwood and Rachel Rose. These books tell the stories of Korean American adolescents returning to Korea for career endeavors and short visits. My analysis highlights the various cultural pressures, identity negotiations, and adjustments experienced by Korean Americans who challenge monolithic Asian American stereotypes. Moreover, I explore how these novels reveal the problematic side of K-pop by providing a more balanced perspective of the K-pop industry beyond its romantic and idealistic depictions of Korea in Korean popular culture.

Like the larger Asian American population, Korean American youth are “caught in a triple bind: pressured to remain faithful to ancestral heritage, while at the same time admonished to assimilate and become fully American, but ultimately finding that because of their Asian genes, many Americans will never give them full acceptance” (de Manuel and Davis vi-vii). This complex positioning is an added burden for youth who are already navigating the “liminal spaces

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<sup>1</sup> The term “voluntary return migration” is interchangeable with ethnic return migration, return migration, and ethnic return.

<sup>2</sup> After World War II, the Korean peninsula was divided into North (Democratic People’s Republic of Korea) and South (Republic of Korea) at the 38th parallel. The two nations are currently in a ceasefire, with South Korea under a democratic government and North Korea under a totalitarian dictatorship. For simplicity, the Republic of Korea will hereafter be referred to as “Korea.”

between childhood and adulthood” (Durham 140). Since Korean Americans are marginalized in the United States, their quest for community and identity intensifies their consumption of popular culture from their homeland (J. Park, “Korean American” 290). The engagement with Korean popular culture such as Korean pop music (K-pop), Korean dramas (K-drama), or Korean movies (K-movie) is a way for them to claim “their cultural rights and constructing their cultural spheres” (J. Park, “Korean American” 290). For others, Korean popular culture can be a catalyst to explore their ethnic identity by visiting their ancestral homelands (K. Yoon 143).

Korean popular culture undoubtedly has positive influences on Korean Americans. However, Korean Americans’ desire to return to Korea may be rooted in romanticized and idealistic relationships and lifestyles portrayed in Korean dramas and movies. When Korean Americans do appear on screen, they are famous music performers who are talented, successful, and already adapted to Korean culture, easily blending in with their Korean fellow band members. With such a limited, yet flawless, depiction of Korean American celebrities, Korean Americans’ desire to return to Korea may be shortsighted, as it fails to consider fraught and complex return migration experiences, especially as they relate to discrimination and acculturative stress.

### **Significance of K-pop-themed Literature and Korean American Representation**

Before delving into the literature, K-pop as a genre and movement needs to be contextualized. Below, I briefly describe the rise of K-pop, its marketing, and its appeal to global fans.

### *Rise of Korean Popular Culture*

Hallyu, a Chinese term meaning “Korean Wave,” refers to the successful growth and export of Korean popular culture encompassing K-drama, K-pop, Korean films, digital games, smartphone technologies, and youth culture (Jin 5). Hallyu 1.0 first came into prominence in East Asia in 1997, when the Korean government shifted Korea’s development policy. Facing the Asian Financial Crisis, the Korean government responded by building favorable conditions for the media industry to boost media content trade overseas (Jin 5; T. Yoon and Jin 48). The concerted effort by cultural industries and the government to advance Korea’s national interests resulted in an extraordinary flow of Korean popular culture outside Korea (Jin 7).

Hallyu 2.0 emerged in 2008 with K-pop’s significant visibility in the West, due to the advancement of digital technologies and social media, combined with fans’ efforts to spread its contents (Jin 5). K-pop is produced in Korea with a combination of catchy music and lyrics, captivating choreography, flamboyant attire, and rhythmic performances delivered by a group of native and non-native Korean male and females called “idols,” who are trained for these roles from an early age. It is a cultural product and business that is systematically planned, controlled, and marketed by the entertainment management and the government (T. Yoon and Jin 59). One way to appeal to the global markets was to mix Western music styles and languages with Korean cultural elements to create a hybrid (Jin 113). Psy’s “Gangnam Style” in 2012 and groups like BTS and Blackpink in the 2020s have had unparalleled success, providing evidence of K-pop’s global popularity in the new Hallyu era.

### *Korean American Artists and Return Migration*

In a push to build up global branding of K-pop stars, the Korean entertainment industry has also been hiring or pulling young ethnic Koreans from overseas, who are believed to be with

“cosmopolitan sensibility and linguistic and musical versatilities” necessary for this generation’s youth (Hee-Eun Lee 117). Notable K-pop groups, like Blackpink, NewJeans, Stray Kids, and NCT have ethnic Korean members from the US, New Zealand, Canada, and Australia, who travel individually or with their groups to promote both themselves and Korean culture. These artists’ careers in their country of origin support Tsuda and Song’s argument that the primary motivation for return migration is for practical purposes, such as professional and educational opportunities not offered in the US (24). In the case of Korean Americans who aspire to be music artists but have difficulty breaking into the predominantly white US industry, they can head to Korea in pursuit of a potential global success (J. Park, “Negotiating Identity” 131). Compared to other overseas Koreans, Korean Americans have less difficulty in migrating to and from Korea, and this ease is facilitated by Korea’s increased efforts for globalization (Helene Lee 42; J. Park, “Negotiating Identity” 130).

#### *Soft Power and Prospect of US-made K-pop Content*

Korean popular culture has also been a tool of soft power, an attractive type of power that uses cultural resources to exert influence leading to behavioral change (G. Lee 210). The spread of Korean standards, culture, and brands through the influence of Korean celebrities can lead to “a long-term influence over the target countries, implying long-lasting market shares” for Korean companies (G. Lee 214). Also, the images of Korea and Koreans presented as “charming, warm, and advanced” have created a safer environment for Koreans to have a better chance of adjusting and face less discrimination in non-Korean societies (G. Lee 215).

The success of soft power to influence the consumption of Korean products is exemplified by youth actively engaging with Korean culture, supporting their favorite artists in numerous ways beyond purchasing physical or digital copies of music and attending concerts:

they buy fan merchandise, beauty products, subscribe to their favorite artist's pay-per-view videos and documentaries, join the official fan club or form local ones, chat with celebrities on social media platforms, and create fan-based social media accounts dedicated to their favorite artists. Recently, K-pop as content is increasingly becoming popular with products and media produced outside of Korea. A growing number of global K-pop fanfiction and young adult literature, for instance, has been published in the United States, including *Comeback: A K-pop Novel* and *Somewhere Only We Know*, the two books discussed in this article. In this manner, K-pop-themed literature has the potential to reach a wide range of audiences, including those who would not have picked up literature about Koreans or Korean Americans without an interest in K-pop, and educating them about Korean American identities, experiences, and culture still absent in mainstream literature.

### *K-pop Content and Return Migration*

As aforementioned, Korean popular culture fosters Korean American adolescents' sense of belonging and connection with their ethnic identities, ethnic group, and culture (K. Yoon 143). Likewise, I argue that US-published K-pop-themed literature can encourage Korean Americans to become return migrants, as they see their cultural identity and challenges reflected in literature and feel an affinity with Korea. Indeed, some second-generation Koreans' interest in their ancestral homeland is elicited by family members, technological advances, "communication, transportation, along with the rise in visibility of Korean pop culture" (Jo 8). However, as discussed later in the paper, integration is not a guarantee for return migrants, as some may feel confused about their sense of belonging and home.

## Methods

### *Book Selection and Positionality*

Transnational texts portray the nonlinear, complex process of migration through diverse, multiple narratives (Brochin and Medina 9). Koshy contends that transnationalism has reshaped the landscape of migration and Asian American identity in such a way that being Asian American is not bound to citizenship and mainstream culture but to the various experiences and continuing cross-cultural exchange rooted in one's ethnicity and race, including return visits and reverse migration (316, 336). The selected transnational books, *Comeback: A K-pop Novel* and *Somewhere Only We Know*, provide readers with a unique perspective on both short visits from the US to Korea and long-term return migration motivated by economic and professional needs.

In the late 2010s, there has been a rise in K-pop-themed books (both serialized and single novels). Within this pool of K-pop-themed young adult novels, books were selected based on specific criteria for analysis. Books needed to address the topic of K-pop, feature a Korean American youth who voluntarily arrives in Korea between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four, and the characters had to discuss their racial or ethnic identities. Elimination of books based on these criteria resulted in the selection of *Comeback: A K-pop Novel*, an independently published novel by white authors Lyn Ashwood and Rachel Rose, and *Somewhere Only We Know* by Korean American author Maurene Goo.

As a transnational Korean, avid K-pop fan, and scholar of Korean diasporic cultures, I evaluated *Comeback: A K-pop Novel* and *Somewhere Only We Know* as culturally authentic books. Lyn Ashwood and Rachel Rose, though cultural outsiders,<sup>3</sup> accurately capture the

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<sup>3</sup> The University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Education, Cooperative Children's Book Center's (CCBC) 2019 publishing statistics on diversity in children's and young adult literature shows that publishing still highly favors

complex identity and experiences of Korean Americans by familiarizing themselves with Korean culture through research and participation (Cai 42). The ambivalent gaze of native Koreans (native-born residents) towards Korean Americans, descriptions of the K-pop industry, Korea's hierarchical culture, the use of the Hangeul (Korean language), and the subversion of the model minority stereotype<sup>4</sup> were a few elements that determined my evaluation. They also included a three-page glossary of formal Korean words and slang to explain Hangeul to readers who may not understand the language. In addition, the two authors stated in their biography that they lived and worked in Korea, are devoted K-pop fans, and engaged and consulted with Korean and non-Korean K-pop fans on the details of the book.

### *Book Analysis*

Based on Braun and Clarke's theory of theoretical thematic analysis, I sought to describe patterns across the data, driven by the motivation, concepts, and known experiences of return migration. As a top-down analysis, the following questions guided my analytic focus to answer how diverse return migration experiences are represented for each character: (1) What motivates Korean Americans to return to Korea?, (2) How are Korean American adolescents received in Korea?, (3) How do Korean American adolescents respond to their experiences in Korea?, and (4) How do Korean American adolescents negotiate their ethnic identity and belonging as return migrants? Passages relevant to these questions were extracted and coded twice, resulting in the codes: othering American; language benefit; inter-ethnic; Korean language; home; family; and

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white authors and white characters (Tyner). Fortunately, K-pop-themed literature published in the last four years is culturally authentic and written by Asian/Asian American authors.

<sup>4</sup> According to Yuko Kawai, the "model minority" stereotype labels Asian Americans as silent, law-abiding, hard-working, upwardly mobile citizens, who are exemplars of success without problems (113, 114). The stereotype perpetuates colorblind ideology and functions to uphold white supremacy by dividing racially marginalized groups (114).



ethnic identity. The codes were then categorized into the following themes: reception of Korean Americans; coping with othering; negotiation of ethnic identity; and belonging. For example, codes such as *othering American*, *language benefit*, and *Korean language* were categorized under *reception of Korean Americans*. The thematic analysis was done twice to ensure I did not miss the necessary data. The themes were then considered in the context of broader cultural and social research on transnationalism and ethnic return, which captured Korean Americans' experiences in their ancestral homeland.

### **Return Migration as Voluntary and Privileged**

*Comeback: A K-pop Novel* and *Somewhere Only We Know* center on the budding relationship between Korean American K-pop stars and their Korean American love interests. In *Comeback*, Emery Jung or M (a member of the K-pop group NEON) and Alana Kim (a former NEON fan and fashion coordinator for a K-pop group) meet backstage at a K-pop music show in Seoul, Korea, while in *Somewhere Only We Know*, K-pop star Lucky, birth name Catherine Nam, coincidentally meets college student Jack Lim, who is temporarily working as a paparazzo on a night bus in Hong Kong. Together they embark on a night adventure.

In both novels, return migration is depicted as a voluntary and privileged move, with the return migrants enjoying financial stability and having access to support from family. Emery and Lucky voluntarily audition as minors (Emery at fifteen and Lucky at thirteen) in Los Angeles to become K-pop idols, seeking a career in Korea. With working visas, they have the advantage of traveling freely between Korea and other countries. Such travel, as well as transportation, lodging, food, and necessities that are all funded by their management company, point to the privileged lifestyle they have in Korea, where they can solely concentrate on singing and dancing rather than worrying about money. NEON and Lucky stay in nice hotels, travel globally for

concerts, and are supported by agents, stylists, and others. K-pop stars' long-term financial stability explains their lifestyle in Korea, which is not available to many return migrants.

In contrast, return migrants Alana and Jack, who visit Korea only for tourism or a temporary visit, display privilege through family connection. Although the sole purpose of Alana's return to Korea is simply described as an "impromptu move to Seoul" (Ashwood and Rose 43) in an attempt to escape the trauma of losing her brother to death by suicide, Alana's emotional and physical connection to her relatives in Korea make her escape easy to achieve.

Unlike other return migrants who may have no familial connection in Korea, Alana has a pre-existing relationship with her aunt and cousins who are happy to host her during her visit. In addition, her cousin Stephanie secures a job for Alana as a part-time fashion coordinator for a female K-pop group and becomes her emotional supporter during times of grief. Alana's easy communication with Stephanie, who has attended an international school and is familiar with Alana's culture and language, alludes to her privileged position in comparison to other characters, as she can maintain her American identity and receive emotional support from a family member. Not much is known about Jack, but a year prior to meeting Lucky, he had traveled to Korea with his immediate family, who functioned as his emotional and financial support system. As can be seen, the four characters' voluntary return migrations differ in motivation as well as advantages that make their return comparatively privileged through family connections, emotional support, or financial stability.

### **Return Migration as Othering Experience**

*Comeback* and *Somewhere Only We Know* portray return migration as rife with discrimination. The perception of Korean Americans in Korea is fluid and heterogeneous (C. Park 125). Emery and Lucky are seen from both a global and local perspective, which is

paradoxical. Globally, native Koreans respect K-pop stars for their contribution to Korea's growing economy and international competitiveness, in particular through their English fluency because Koreans view English as a prestigious language (Jo 131). Locally, however, their low proficiency in Korean prevents them from fully integrating into Korean society. If they do not meet the societal expectations regarding their social behavior and language ability, they are deemed foreign (Jo 134).

### *Language Fluency*

To penetrate the Western market and work toward cultural globalization (Jin and Ryoo 112), Emery and Lucky's English fluency are valuable resources. Emery Jung and Stuart Shin, a Korean Australian, are the only fluent English speakers in NEON and are naturally appointed to represent transnational popular culture across globalized media outlets. In the same way, Lucky's versatile talent and impeccable English are what captivate fans. "Perfect" English is impressive to Korean audiences who consider "overseas Koreans" from developed countries like the US more respectable compared to other returnee groups (C. Park 122). The English language is elevated to a global language and is essential to becoming a productive global citizen (Jo 132).

While English proficiency is considered a symbol of success and globality, it does not guarantee integration into Korea, since Korean language skills take precedence as an inclusive or exclusive social factor. In both books, as soon as the Korean American characters open their mouths, the differences between them and their Korean counterparts become apparent; differences felt by both Koreans and Korean Americans. On a family trip to Korea, Jack's taxi driver criticizes his sister's awkward Korean and then his parents for not teaching their children Korean. Jack articulates, "My family went to Seoul last year and when my sister couldn't speak Korean very well to a cab driver he started like, berating my parents. Saying they should have

done a better job” (Goo 113). In this experience, the taxi driver is successful in shaming Jack who projects the judgment onto himself and “still felt a little ashamed. Like a bad Korean” (Goo 113) for his weak knowledge of the Korean language.

In the same manner, Alana’s use of Korean, self-proclaimed as equivalent to a child’s Korean proficiency, immediately sets her apart from native Koreans. Her brief greeting to Emery’s manager at their first meeting prompts a surprise reaction from him: “Your accent. . . You’re not Korean?” (Ashwood and Rose 76), while shifting his stare between Emery and Alana as if to signify that they are of the same kind: Americans. During this meeting, as well as subsequent meetings with the president of Emery’s entertainment company and NEON members, Alana’s accent and belonging are questioned. To their puzzlement, Alana always has a prepared answer: “I’m Korean American. My parents live in Chicago” (104), which indicates the exhaustion she experiences from being repeatedly questioned about her belonging and her awareness of denied membership in Korean society.

Native Koreans’ high expectations for ethnic Koreans to hold Korean language fluency reflects “the ideology that equates national identity with linguistic proficiency” (Jo 133). In this sense, to be an ethnic Korean and not know the language is tantamount to a lack of loyalty to Korea (Jo 136). Such presuppositions can be offensive to Korean Americans who are trying to acclimate to Korea. The status of many Korean Americans is analogous to the space Alana occupies inside her Korean relative’s home. She is hosted in the guest room, where she feels like a stranger, despite her efforts to feel comfortable in her new environment and learn the language, signified by her Korean textbooks on the bookshelves.

*Breaking the Unspoken Rules*

Emery's actions and cultural identity are also marked as foreign by Koreans, reminding him of his cultural distance from the natives. Emery's otherness is clearly labeled for him when he is recruited to participate in a cooking show as an American. While filming the show, Emery's Korean cooking partner, a senior in the entertainment industry, sets Emery apart from his ethnicity, assuming that he has never been to a Korean street market or tasted *hotteok*, a Korean sweet pancake because "he's a *foreigner*. . . spoken like a shameful secret" (Ashwood and Rose 139). The above statement is an expression of native Koreans' underlying feeling of betrayal by Korean emigrants, exacerbated by Korean American youths' lack of cultural familiarity and language ability (N. Kim 307).

Under such discriminatory practices, Koreans hint at the need for Emery and Lucky to modify their thoughts and actions, in order to align with Korean cultural rules and collectivism. When a rumor circulates that Emery has challenged the senior celebrity for disrespecting him, netizens on social media condemn Emery as a misfit because he "lacks respect for the way things are done in the Korean entertainment industry" (Ashwood and Rose 166). A condition of being in the Korean workplace is to follow the social hierarchy, according to which respect is shown to those who are older in age or more experienced in the industry (Helene Lee 53). When Emery breaches this order, the public feels the need to put him in his place.

Lucky is also taught to keep elements of her life secret from the Korean public; her anxiety, considered a disorder and taboo in Korea, must be kept under wraps as it may taint her popularity and worthiness as a K-pop star. Lucky admits the key to her success: "I had zero scandals. Not one photo of me drinking. Of a boyfriend. Of bad manners. I was always humble, gracious, and contained. Perfect" (Goo 22). Yet, the Korean society's assumption that anxiety is a sign of weakness makes her feel othered. In other words, if feeling foreign in Korea was not

enough, Alana is also being held to a higher standard, compounded by the existing narrow societal views about mental health which thwart her from being her whole authentic self.

In both Emery and Alana's case, Korean society's surveillance makes them feel othered. In particular, potential public disapproval is acute for the two K-pop stars, who must be marketed as flawless role models and maintain a façade of a jovial attitude despite their personal struggles. Their anxiety that the media may turn their back on them if they show their imperfectness reflects a real-life issue in the K-pop industry. In a recent real story, the public became aware of the underlying depression of two female K-pop stars only after their deaths. Sulli, a former member of girl band F(x), died by suicide in October 2019, and Goo Hara, a former member of girl band Kara, died by suicide in November 2019.

### **Return Migration Requiring Physical and Emotional Adjustment**

In addition to experiencing culture shock, Korean Americans must follow strict industry rules which require drastic decisions for them to integrate into society. From the beginning of their training to become K-pop stars, Emery and Lucky must make physical and emotional adjustments in order to operate “normally” in their new country.

#### *Physical Adjustment*

For the sake of survival and career advancement, Emery and Lucky conform to the society and industry's beauty standards. Because Korea is a country of lookism that discriminates people based on physical appearance, plastic surgery has become a mainstream phenomenon and a necessity if men and women want to secure jobs, promotions, and participation in various social activities in a competitive society (Nah et al. 75). Lucky's extreme diet and plastic surgery to create double eyelids and a pointy nose as defined by modern Korean beauty standards exemplify her acceptance of having to subscribe to the existing Korean social

beauty standards. Likewise, Emery wears an all-white costume, lightens his black hair to brown, and wears blue contacts over his dark brown eyes (Ashwood and Rose 3) to fit the high aesthetic standards of Korean celebrities.

Such reconstruction of K-pop artists' appearances by management companies is also part of a global production and distribution process that combines visual and audio components, managed and commodified by entertainment companies (S. Lee 5). Hence, even though such extreme cosmetic change is uncommon in the US, Emery and Lucky must adopt new views and processes as normal in Korea to better integrate into the society and workplace. Moreover, as they stand for the beauty norm, Emery and Lucky become a national brand and walking advertisement for young fans who are potentially next in playing out the cycle of conforming to the Korean social beauty standards that perpetuate lookism. In short, the two K-pop stars' adjusted bodies not only symbolize adherence to Korean beauty standards but also contribute to toxic Korean culture.

### *Emotional Adjustment*

Adjustment to Korea's dominant culture also takes the form of in-person emotional support through which Korean Americans balance their new culture and their American culture. Emery and Lucky use social media, text, email, phone calls, and video calls to maintain connections to their family and the US; nevertheless, these remote communications do not help alleviate their feelings of displacement.

Emery frequently confides in Alana, his only Korean American friend, about his mental and emotional struggles of continuing his career while battling with a strained family relationship. Emery's reliance can be interpreted as his desperate need for home support, embodied by Alana whose willingness to listen and empathize with his mental illness is

attributed to American culture; in contrast, a native Korean might have encouraged Emery to keep silent because discussing mental health is considered taboo in Korea. Emery's conscious attempt to maintain his American identity while in Korea is also revealed by his need to share his knowledge of Independence Day with Alana:

Emery (8:42 a.m.): Happy 4<sup>th</sup> of July!

Emery (8:43 a.m.): I figured you'd actually care. Stu didn't. I swear, any time it's an American holiday he becomes 10x more Australian.

Emery (8:43 a.m.): Ah man, now I want to see fireworks

Alana (10:46 p.m.): I miss the fireworks, too 😊 Happy 4th! (Ashwood and Rose 82)

Beyond this co-ethnic bond, Emery, Stuart, and Jaden, a Taiwanese Canadian, find mutual support as the non-native Korean members of NEON who share the same experiences of working in the same industry away from home. By wanting to celebrate a holiday intrinsic to US residents with Alana, and by finding social stability with NEON members who share similar sentiments about their wariness of living in Korea, Emery finds ways to adapt to his difficult circumstances.

In contrast, Lucky, having lived in Korea the same number of years as Emery, fails to achieve emotional adjustment, and this impacts her attachment to Korea. In her confession to Jack, Lucky laments not having had any friends who could provide her with psychosocial support during her time in Korea from the age of thirteen. Even worse, Lucky is excluded from a group of Korean girls who mock her accent and force her to "form an alliance" (Goo 112) with a Filipina girl, despite the two having nothing in common and finding each other annoying. Here, "alliance" is ironic because it is not formed based on genuine support, but rather on the ostracization of both immigrants by native Koreans, thus failing to satisfy Lucky's emotional



needs. Lucky suggests that her Korean heritage calls for someone who is able to understand her balancing two identities in Korea, which she finds in Jack:

He looked over at me and I felt a jolt of energy pass between us. Not flirty or anything — a connection of some kind. I never got to talk to anyone about stuff like this. Korean American kid stuff. No one really understood this part of me in Korea. And it felt good because I didn't have to lie. In a weird way, I could be a true version of myself as Fern.<sup>5</sup> (114)

Lucky's remarks also demonstrate that she not only lacks support but is also tired of playing the role that is imposed on her by the Korean entertainment industry. The spotlight that comes with fame is not for her; her homesickness and nostalgia for the time spent with her immediate family in Los Angeles eventually drive her to return to the US. Through two characters who have the same occupation and live in Korea for the same number of years, the two novels illustrate how Korean Americans may experience different processes of adjustment, an adjustment that may sometimes never be fulfilled.

### **Return Experience as Negotiating Identity and Belonging**

The apparent discrimination and required adjustments inevitably compel Korean American returnees to negotiate their ethnic identity and belonging. Lucky, even with her extensive time spent in Korea, is uncertain of her Koreanness, a trait that is tested in her motherland: "So, I felt very Korean? Like, I'm connected to these roots, I have no identity issue! But then I got to Korea and felt like. . . an alien or something" (Goo 113). Lucky's lived experiences in the dominant culture contradict her internal ties to her ethnic culture, making her

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<sup>5</sup> Lucky adopts the alias Fern to conceal her identity from Jake. Fern's backstory is that she has traveled to Hong Kong as part of a church choir.

feel “alien” in a literal and figurative sense: she is a foreign-born resident living in a foreign country and feels estranged to her motherland.

Jack, on the other hand, perceives his ethnic identity as a significant part of his life, even though he has the shortest physical link to Korea compared to the other characters. When Lucky’s craving for fish congee for breakfast clashes with Jack’s wish to eat sourdough bread, Lucky labels his diet “American” to which Jack responds, “Are you going to take away my Korean card now?” (93). The belief that one must practice specific cultural patterns inside and outside the home to earn the right to be an ethnic Korean contrasts with what Jack believes: he feels his lack of adherence to Korean customs does not make him any less of a Korean. Jack also shows deep interest in Lucky’s return migration. He asks, “When did you move to Korea?” (125), “How was that?” (126), “Did you feel awkward moving to Korea? Like, did you feel Korean enough?” (112), “Does that feel good? To speak Korean well?” (113), and “Hey, what’s the word in Korean?” (155). Such questions, ranging from basic language to her return migration experiences, hint at Jack’s unfulfilled desire to be more connected to his mother country and the potential of his return migration. With different degrees of confrontation regarding their ethnic identities, Jack and Lucky demonstrate an indirect correlation between the time spent in their ethnic homeland and their feeling of cultural attachment.

This is not to say that all Korean Americans negotiate their belonging. Emery copes with cultural conflicts by staying steadfast to the objective of his return and finding social stability within his community of friends. His balanced strategy to adapt to and stay in Korea suggests that instead of building a nationalistic identity that is exclusively American or Korean, Emery uses his “ethnic identity as a Korean American who takes the best of the both worlds” (C. Park 137), while also visiting the US for concert tours. Conversely, Alana grounds her identity in the

US as asserted in her brief introduction to native Koreans who question her nationality, “No, I’m American. My parents live in Chicago, but I also have family here in Seoul” (Ashwood and Rose 76), demonstrating her stronger sense of belonging in the US than in Korea. This sense of here and there is not surprising when considering that Alana had briefly visited Korea two years prior, and her recent return is also for a short visit.

Regardless of the four characters’ choice to stay or leave Korea, their connection to their ethnic identities and cultural practices stretches beyond space and time. When Alana settles back in the US, her “*real* home” (Ashwood and Rose 245), she laments “leaving her heart in Seoul” (272), nostalgically hoping for a future return to Korea. Similarly, Lucky’s decision to depart Korea is not a rejection of her ethnic identity; Koreanness remains part of her, across borders. Maintaining her K-pop career, she signs with a smaller LA-based company. Lucky therefore voluntarily continues back-and-forth migration across the globe, including to Korea and the US.

### **Conclusion: Diversity Within Transnational Return Migrants**

Exposure to Korean and mainstream American culture—whether through transnational practices at home or ethnic return migration—drives Korean American youth to reidentify themselves. Since the United States that they consider home does not provide them with a racially and culturally inclusive space, Korean American youth negotiate with uncertain senses of belonging, further complicated by being in-between childhood and adulthood (K. Yoon 142). They engage in ethnic homeland cultures by consuming Korean popular culture, seeking cultural forms of positive identities.

The lifestyle portrayed in Korean popular culture, including K-pop, propels some Korean Americans to return to Korea and start a new life where they are racially, ethnically, and culturally the majority. And as return migration is a vital part of the modern experience of many

Korean Americans, it is becoming increasingly recognized in American young adult literature. Accordingly, the consumption of ethnic popular culture and transnational literature like *Comeback: A K-pop Novel* and *Somewhere Only We Know* can foster Korean American adolescents' connection to their ethnic identity and sense of belonging (J. Park, "Negotiating Identity" 127), even inspiring some to return to their ancestral homeland. At the same time, these books can compel them to develop a critical literacy of the imagined community that is constructed by Korean popular culture, which romantically and idealistically portrays Korea without adequately representing the difficulties faced by returning Korean Americans.

As I have shown, Korean American experiences in their ethnic homeland differ from one another. Return to their ancestral homeland leaves some Korean Americans content and others disillusioned, particularly by native Koreans' ambivalent attitude towards them. Whether they remain or leave Korea, Emery, Lucky, Jack, and Alana undergo a process of negotiating and redefining what it means to be Korean American (C. Park 138). Their decision to retain their ethnic identity across national boundaries can be influenced by this process. By building community and practicing cultural activities outside of Korea through transnational travel, all the Korean American characters remain connected to their roots and learn to define their individual identities.

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