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Governing Difference: Reflecting on the Bio-Politics of Cure

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Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea by Eunjung Kim. Duke University Press, 2017. 312 pp. Cloth: \$99.95, paperback: \$25.95.

In *Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea*, Eunjung Kim critically examines the cultural politics of cure in modern Korean history through an intersectional analysis of disability, gender, and sexuality. Kim offers the reader sharp insight into the ways in which the ideology of cure has been framed within what might be called “modernity’s rescue mission.”¹ The ways in which modernity gestures at curing “vulnerable” bodies through such cultural practices as rehabilitation are embedded within the Western world’s and nation-state’s ideologies meant to exclude, to dehumanize, and to exercise violence on marginalized bodies under the guise of mercy, benevolence, or the rescue of the Other.

Cure appears in *Curative Violence* through a genealogical analysis of how disabled, gendered, and assumed asexual bodies are positioned in relation to the body politic of the nation-state and transnational practices. The term ‘*Ch’iyu*’ in the Sino-Korean language is made of up two terms: *ch’i*, “to govern,” and *yu*, “to cure.” To cure, Kim explains, is “to properly govern the body and its social relation” (3). Historically, the colonial Chosŏn constructed its body politic through its ideologies to normalize, to invest, and to rehabilitate people with non-normative bodies and minds. This curative ideology

is manifested through a range of cultural, historical, and social practices: the lingering impacts of colonialism and eugenic policies on Korean culture, the historical treatment of people with Hansen's disease, the structural conditions of austerity for disabled people and their families, the advancement of science and technologies related to an ableist desire to cure disability, as well as the cultural politics of disability, gender, and sexuality in films and literary discourses. Interestingly, Kim goes beyond the existing medical industrial complex in which cure is situated to re-conceptualize cure as "a crossing of times and categories through metamorphosis" and as "a transaction and negotiation that involves various effects" (10). As she observes, current discourses of cure have constructed disability as a form of death or as unlivable. The state's imperative to cure is governed by its desire to normalize bodies. However, she acutely asks: "What happens when cure promises to take bodies from the category of disability to that of normality, but leaves them in the middle?" (9).

Kim examines cure as the transactions between disabled subjects and institutions. While power works to normalize marginalized bodies, it "ends up destroying the subject in the curative process" (14). Cure operates through an ableist and heteronormative

ideology of normalcy which renders the body curable, investable, and otherwise excludable through its invisible and visible acts of violence. Indeed, it is difficult to disentangle the ways ableism, sexism, nationalism, and transnationalism intersect through mechanisms deeply rooted in the production of power that governs the body. The story of *Sim Chong*, a narrative that appeared in textbooks during the colonial era and continues to be reprinted in schools today, is a classic example of how narratives of cure are deeply rooted within gendered and ableist ideologies that construct female bodies through the discourses of "sacrifice" and "filial piety." This cultural production is central to the body politic of modern Korea.

Critically, Kim argues that "curative power . . . fundamentally relies on the presence of disabled bodies framed with a certain emotional effect" (3). Indeed, each chapter seeks to unpack the framing of normality and difference through the presence of disability and how it is reflected in the public's emotion about curing disability. The *Ugly Creature*, an oral folklore from 1936, offers an excellent example of how the desire to fix disability, seen as a hereditary fate that runs across generations, is rooted in the public fear of eugenics. The story depicts Ōnnyōni, an "ugly," "despised," and "ridiculed" disabled woman who

desires to transform her fate and ends up being sexually assaulted and becoming pregnant. Her “suffering” life is seen as being reproduced through the birth of her newborn baby, who bears the same kind of impairment. The eugenic ideology of eliminating disability is deeply embedded in this cultural narrative, and yet, this ideology is distinctive in the Korean context because it reflects the post-colonial desire to heal itself through rehabilitation.

This book is influential for critical disability scholarship and other related fields in two ways: first, it unveils complex relationships between the body, the nation-state, and of transnational eugenics, which exercise violence on the marginalized body. The ways in which cure is constructed by the intersection of institutional ableism, racism, and heterosexism, which plays out within intimate relationships such as mother-child, father-daughter, and heterosexual couples, reflects the usefulness of conceptualizing cure beyond bio-medical categories. Thus, Kim successfully achieves her goal of constructing a more complex understanding of cure as “a multifaceted negotiation, often enabling and disabling at the same time” (7). Second, Kim extensively engages with existing disability theories developed by Western disability studies, and yet, she locates the cultural and historical

specificity of the Korean context as a vantage point for her theoretical intervention. This politics of location is extremely important for reframing disability studies in the global South in response to the hegemony of knowledge production framed within Western disability studies in the face of cultural imperialism. As Edward Said (1994) observes, the critical tasks of intellectuals from the colonial and peripheral regions, who deal with metropolitan culture by their scholarships and engagements, ultimately results in the transformation of the very terrain of the discipline.² By locating the politics of disability, gender, and sexuality within specific historical, political, and economic conditions of modern Korea and its transnational history, this book is a critical response to the politics of erasure, namely, the tendency to ignore, efface, and homogenize the complexity of disability in the global South.

In my engagement with this text, I read *Curative Violence* from a “history of the present” advocated by Foucault, which allows me to understand how the present politics of disability in Korea has come to be.³ A history of the present illustrates how certain ways of thinking about disability and normality, as well as its biopolitics of cure, have been embedded within the historical contours between the past and present. At the same

time, Kim maintains her post-colonial approach in challenging discrimination against disabled women, while refusing to adopt a universalizing and homogenized approach to disability and human rights adopted by the global North. Referring to Donna Haraway's critique of the West's tendency to construct other cultures as resources in support of its own agenda, Kim argues provocatively, "It is important to refuse the positioning of non-Western representations of disability as exotic in that sense, so that important differences can be appreciated, rather than mystified" (230).

Curative Violence, then, turns its focus to the present as a way of unfolding time. Kim traces the relationships between the past, present, and future in ways that give meaning back to disability. Chapter 1 examines cure through what Kim calls the emergence of "hereditary drama" (50) that arose from the colonial eugenics. These are used as a moral justification for denying disabled women the right to marry and to reproduce through the ideological assumption that disability is undesirable. Chapter 2 examines cure as "proxy"—the ways in which (non-disabled) people's devotion to their family member with a disability carries the ableist desire to transform disabled bodies to enabled bodies. At the same time, the gendered representations of these cultural

products and the total disappearance of disabilities reflect the modernizing desire of the post-colonial nation.

Chapter 3 traces the link between violence and cure through the constructions of gendered relations within a modern, capitalist society. It is an excellent read on the transnational aspects of Hansen's disease and its connection to disability and illness. The final chapter deals with the emergence of public discourse on the "sex drive" of disabled people. It challenges the politics of help that is embedded within a humanitarian discourse of "sex volunteers" (209). The final chapter also revisits different ways of theorizing time in relation to cure and its politics of erasing disability. In the conclusion, Kim re-articulates her thesis by refusing to essentialize the difference in disability politics as merely an indication of social progress. Instead, she offers an alternative proposal for "co-existing in time" (218) that challenges colonial power in governing disabled and female bodies.

Curative Violence thus offers an essential textual and political intervention into the shortage of disability studies in the global South by attempting to unveil the complex relationships between transnational imperialism, the nation-state, and its subjects, as well as their consequences within specific spaces and times.

At the same time, it maintains its vigorous defense for disability and women's rights in a post-colonial context. Disability theorist Nirmala Erevelles comments that *Curative Violence* is "situated in this uncomfortable space."⁴ This work is an essential read for critical disability studies and other related fields, especially as it creates a new and inspiring conversation on the cultural politics of disability and gender in the global South.

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NOTES

1. Eunjung Kim and Michelle Jarman. "Modernity's Rescue Mission: Postcolonial Transactions of Disability and Sexuality," *Canadian Journal of Film Studies* 17, no. 1 (2008): 52.
2. Said, Edward W., *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994).
3. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 31.
4. Nirmala Erevelles, "Curative Violence: Rehabilitating Disability, Gender, and Sexuality in Modern Korea by Eunjung Kim," *Feminist Formations* 30, no. 1 (2018): 240–243, 240.