

Silenced No More:  
Korean Americans Remember the “Forgotten War”  
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Silence is a common signature of profoundly traumatic events not the least of which are wars. For survivors of armed conflict, it attests to unspeakable violence and unresolved wounds. For state actors, it shields the geopolitics of war from public scrutiny. The Korean War is a testament to both conditions—a horrific civil conflict bearing untold civilian and military casualties and also an interventionist war in which U.S. stakes in the emerging Cold War dictated the allied response. It is no wonder the Korean War is best known as the Forgotten War.

Little if any talk about the war has been recorded especially among noncombatants, including members of the Korean diaspora in the United States. However, in one of the first oral-history projects with civilian survivors living in the United States, Korean Americans began to offer their narratives of the war and, paradoxically, insights into the multiple impediments to speaking freely (Liem, 2003/2004). Their memory-sharing also marks the beginning of a surge of interest in exploring the Korean War as experienced by ordinary citizens, through innovative storytelling projects within the Korean diaspora in the United States. This essay addresses both the silencing of memory and recent community-led efforts to resist forgetting.

#### I. The Korean War and the Formation of the (Silent) Korean Diaspora in the United States

No period of the modern era has had more enduring significance for Koreans throughout the diaspora than the Korean War, perhaps with the exception of the Japanese colonial era, 1910-1945. The war sundered prospects for genuine Korean independence at the end of World War II, yoked nation-building to Cold War geopolitics, and caused the mass dispersion of the Korean people, both domestically and internationally (Cumings, 1997). At the conclusion of World War II in the Pacific Theater, the Soviet Union acquiesced to a U.S. proposal to divide Korea at the 38<sup>th</sup> parallel ostensibly to oversee the disarmament of Japanese military forces. The partition was to be temporary, leading to the establishment of a unified Korean provisional government and eventual independence. But U.S. and Soviet officials failed to reach agreement on a mechanism to achieve this objective. Shortly thereafter, the United States pushed through separate presidential elections in the south under United Nations auspices despite the opposition of the majority of Koreans. The Republic of Korea (South Korea) was inaugurated on August 15, 1948, and a mere three weeks later, the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (North Korea) was founded in the north. The division of the Korean peninsula would be hardened by war two years later.

While the politics and prosecution of the Korean War have been the subject of extensive academic research (Cumings, 1981; Merrill, 1989; Park, 1980), remarkably little has been done to record the human, personal meanings of the conflict for Koreans, especially those living in the United States. This is a striking omission in view of the extraordinary devastation inflicted on the Korean people by this war—more than three million civilian casualties (ten percent of the population overall and an estimated thirty percent of the population in North Korea where U.S. bombing campaigns were unrestrained), a decimated social and physical infrastructure throughout the peninsula, and ten million people separated from their families with no genuine prospects for reunion now more than six decades later (Halliday and Cumings, 1988).

As with other wars of the twentieth century, the continuing significance of the Korean War resides in complex sociopolitical and psychological legacies. What is unique to the Korean conflict, however, is that it remains stalemated in an armistice agreement resulting in unresolved hostilities that exacerbate current conflict among the chief protagonists, the United States, North Korea, and South Korea. Thus, the Korean War not only endures in, political, social, and psychological legacies for

Korean Americans but also persists as an active, military confrontation that periodically threatens to flare up into all-out war.

Among the war's defining legacies for Korean Americans is the very existence of the Korean diasporic community in the United States. At the start of the Cold War era when fewer than several thousand Koreans were resident in America and emigration from Korea was restricted to 100 people per year, thousands of Korean military brides began entering the United States, laying the foundation for rapid chain migration that would ensue when national quotas were lifted in 1965 (Yuh, 2002). The war also spawned a continuous wave of international adoptions to the United States, making Korea the primary source of transnational adoptees until 1991. For many others, especially those who migrated southward during the war, Cold War ideological fervor in South Korea created myriad economic and political hardships, motivating them to seek refuge in the United States once the pathway to immigration was opened. Korean America was born in the heat and wake of the Korean War.

In spite of the Korean War's central role in shaping their personal histories, early Korean immigrants and their descendants have had virtually no voice in shaping U.S. collective memory of the Korean conflict. Most Americans do not realize that their elderly Korean American neighbors are survivors of an unfinished war, and seldom is the topic broached spontaneously either within the Korean American community or across ethnic divides. If "containment" was the byword of the Cold War in the United States, it persists in the silence that shrouds this critical period in U.S. history, denies its survivors the opportunity to heal and reconcile, and obfuscates the origins of current tensions between the United States and North Korea.

## II. Koreans in the Diaspora Remember "the Forgotten War"

An early meaningful crack in this wall of silence emerged, not coincidentally, during the period leading up to the first summit meeting between the leaders of North and South Korea in June 2000, more than four decades after the signing of the 1953 Korean War armistice.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this moment, there was virtually no open talk about the Korean War among Koreans living in the United States and certainly no published accounts of their war memories and legacies. The historic opening between the north and south and the possibility of reconciling across entrenched ideological differences would have far-reaching effects, reverberating throughout the Korean diaspora. With the thawing of Cold War tensions, Korean Americans were, on a small yet significant scale, willing to speak out about the war, and more than three dozen first- and second-generation Korean Americans agreed to participate in the "Korean Americans Remember the Korean War" oral history project launched by this writer (Liem, 2003/2004).

Having consented to be interviewed, people told detailed stories spontaneously and with considerable emotion, the power and intensity of which belied any notion that forgetting or disinterest could account for their prior silence. Paradoxically, while these oral histories were rich in detail and urgency, they also bore witness to the politics of silence that had, throughout the Cold War, relegated survivor accounts like theirs to the dustbin of history. Interviewees, this is to say, not only spoke about their wartime experiences, but also, grappled with the great difficulty they experienced in talking about their long-silenced memories of the war. As two survivors respectively stated:

Very few people talk about it. I was a beggar for days. Sometimes I am so ashamed, I don't tell about that. Oh, we hide, of course, always talking good things, and not what's shameful.

No, I never talked about it before. At church or with church groups we should talk about it but the politics always divide us.

It merits asking: what prevents speaking out about the war in the face of an evident desire to tell and be heard?

### III. Official State Narratives and the Politics of Silence

In *Perilous Memories: The Asia-Pacific War(s)* (2001), T. Fujitani, Geoffrey White, and Lisa Yoneyama introduce the idea of “critical remembering” as an oppositional force to master narratives crafted by both Allied and Axis states about World War II in the Pacific Theater. They describe “official” remembering as a struggle to preserve “global, national, and masculinist narratives of the major warring powers” (3) in the face of marginalized memories—for example, gendered, ethnic, and local, that could subvert dominant historical accounts. The very investment of nations in preserving their accounts of history—“...the urgent and intense political stakes involved in remembering wars”—presupposes contested readings of the past, “perilous memories” that must be forgotten or otherwise silenced to preserve the claims of the state (Fujitani et. al., 2001, 2).

In the case of the Korean War, the suppression of alternative voices in the United States has been fostered by pervasive state and popular narratives of the war as “forgotten,” “unknown,” a heroic victory over communism, an affirmation of the United States as savior of South Korea (Ehrhart, 2001; Levine, 2001).<sup>2</sup> The reference to the Korean War as “forgotten” is probably the most familiar to Americans. This epitaph virtually erases the first hot war of the Cold War from the U.S. historical record. Recalling the Korean War as “forgotten” distances the United States from its interventionist role in the war’s origins and continuing aftermath, in particular, its role in the division of the Korean peninsula and the ever-present threat of renewed military conflict, as well as its geopolitical interests in South Korea as a strategic land base and launching pad on the Asian continent.

More to the point, fixing the Korean War in collective consciousness as “forgettable” or ideologically framing it as the rescue of South Koreans from international communism significantly displaces firsthand recollections of the indiscriminate brutality of that conflict by civilian survivors of that war. In this regard, Korean American oral histories of the war, as “critical remembering,” bear “the potential to disrupt the dominant paradigms” (Diaz, 2001, 159) and challenge their veracity.

### IV. Korean American Critical Remembering

Over six decades have passed since the end of active fighting in the Korean War, and many Korean American survivors of that war have gone on to establish new lives in the United States. One might reasonably expect these conditions, not to mention the pressure to “remember” the Korean War as “forgotten” in the United States, might have eroded Korean American memories of this conflict. Lisa Lowe contends that the naturalization of Asian immigrants in the United States requires “forgetting the history of war in Asia and adopting the national historical narrative that disavows the existence of the American imperial project...[and] acceding to a political fiction of equal rights that is generated through the denial of history...” (1996, 27). The pressure to adopt state narratives is experienced by all citizens, especially during periods of national crisis, as evident in the United States following September 11, 2001. But for immigrants, especially racial minorities whose political and social status is tenuous, the ideological authority of the state can be particularly insidious. For Korean Americans throughout the Cold War and even into the present, it has been a matter of self-preservation to foreclose any talk about the Korean War that might complicate the dominant U.S. “savior” narrative and call into question the past and continuing role of the United States in the un-ended Korean conflict.

But the absence of talk by no means signifies the loss of memory as evident in this excerpt from Suntae Chun’s oral history. Chun was a first-year high school student when the war broke out. His hometown was Kaesong, a border town within the southern zone before the war that would be ceded to north according to the terms of the 1953 Armistice Agreement. Within six months of the outbreak of full-scale war, he was separated from his family and survived on his own until the war ended. He has

been a resident of California for four decades.

Because the Americans bombed the city every day, we moved away from Kaesong about eight or ten kilometers. One day, we remembered chickens we left at our home, so I went to Kaesong to get the chickens. Then there was an airplane sound, so I ran to the tunnel my father and I had dug. Then airplanes, about two, three, or four of them, with propellers, came and for the first time I saw, what do they call it, carpet-bombing. They just all lined up, from the south to the north and they covered the whole area. Then the airplanes circled around and came back, east to west.

I thought what they dropped was pamphlets...because white stuff kept falling down everywhere. No bombing sound, just a kind of dull thud each time...then I found out it was not pamphlets—it was a parachuted bomb. It goes five to ten meters into the ground.

Then, all the airplanes left and a little bit later, there was one of the largest explosions I ever heard, right in the middle of the city, like an atomic bomb you see in the pictures, huge dust and smoke rising high up into the sky. I thought, what the hell was that? There's no airplane and there's a big explosion. We didn't think about it as a time bomb because we never saw it before. That's a ghost plane, a ghost bomber or something. Anyway, five minutes later, another bomb exploded again—then, every five minutes for hours...so scary.

Now, there were people hiding downtown in the rich people's basements, twenty, thirty, forty people, young kids and old people, you know, and wives. In many cases time bombs dropped right next to them but they didn't know what it was. They only heard a thud and sometimes came out. So they are all buried alive.

While memories like these rarely circulate in the Korean American community, much less American society, in general, it is evident that the proscription to forget has not purged the war from Chun's memory. Nor are recollections like these without peril for Korean War master narratives. In his "critical remembering," Chun humanizes the "collateral" damage sustained by ordinary Koreans from massive, indiscriminate U.S. aerial bombing campaigns—campaigns acknowledged by military historians as unprecedented in their elastic definition of what constituted a "military target," stretched "to include every human-made structure" (Sahr Conway-Lanz, 2006, 20.).

Other memories upset the received representation of the Korean War as the rescue of South Koreans from an alien, communist north. At the height of McCarthyism, in the face of huge military and civilian casualties and a war that ended in stalemate, it would have been untenable in the United States to portray the South Korean people as other than singularly anti-communist. Yet, the memories of some Korean Americans contest this Cold War political narrative.

Lee Kyung-Hui was six years old when the war broke out. Her father was a member of the South Korean constabulary before, during, and after the war in the Mt. Jiri area, an important base for the South Korean resistance movement. South Korean guerilla forces sympathetic to the North's call for national unity played a prominent role in the conflict before and during the hot war. Lee's recollection of her parents' activities during the war capture not only their political ambivalence, but also, a sense of common humanity across political differences not available in statist narratives.

[M]y father was a police chief in the Chiri-san [Mt. Jiri] area. There were lots of guerrillas in the mountains, and he was constantly involved in combat. According to my mother, he was very ambivalent. I think in a way, he could understand where those people were coming from and

was very much distraught with what he was doing. But I think that he was convinced that he had to do it to end the war.

My mother used to tell me about feeding a young lady who was captured in the Chiri mountains. She probably was going to be tried and put in jail but she was very hungry and so my mother fed her and she felt really sorry for that young lady. She was captured and brought to my house because she was in bad shape, so starved—so my mother cared for her.

After the war, in the seventies and eighties, famous novelists wrote a lot of stories about how these people died for Communism and their idealism. They were hoping that the communist or socialist country would be a utopia. But they didn't know what they were getting into. My mother...genuinely understood their idealism, so it was very painful for her to reflect on how these young people died.

Sung Eun Park was a teenager during the war. Her father was “taken north” by retreating North Korean soldiers following the U.S./UN recapture of Seoul early in the fighting. Most likely he died during flight. While no friend of communism, Mrs. Park offered a remarkably nuanced account of her feelings toward North Koreans during the war:

My brother did not want to join the [South Korean] army. He said, “How can I fight? Two boys shoot each other; one is from the north, the other the south. But they are not our enemies. They are like brothers. What kind of people do that? My mother and I were the same way; that's why we were always against this war, really. My mother was a strong complainer. She said, “So I have to fight my brother, this is my own brother! How can I do that?”

These memories do not square with the image of America as singularly the champion of South Korea in a struggle against the onslaught of an alien, communist people to the north. They suggest a more complicated civil conflict in which the suffering of combatants and civilians alike may well have been intensified by familial or otherwise intimate identification with the “enemy.” The war as remembered by these Korean Americans resists and thus imperils a self-serving, Cold War narrative of “good vs. evil.”

## V. The Politics of Silence and the Korean American Community

Ignacio Martín-Baró, a Salvadoran social psychologist assassinated for his vocal opposition to counterinsurgent state violence in El Salvador, proposed the concept of social polarization to capture the dehumanization of social relationships characteristic of extreme conflict situations: “People are...no longer valued in and of themselves but rather on the basis of whether they are ‘ours’ or ‘theirs’...for or against our side in the conflict” (1994, 113). This extreme distortion of social relations—in essence, “us or them”—fosters pervasive self-censorship and guardedness for everyone, imperiling the very social foundation of society. For Martín-Baró, this destruction of the basic social fabric constitutes one of the most devastating yet neglected consequences of war.

The Korean American community still bears the imprint of a legacy of division from the immediate postwar era when ideological conformity was strictly enforced, in some cases by agents of South Korean intelligence agencies (Choy, 1979). With regard to anti-communist politics within the Korean American community, Edward Chang describes the disturbing long-arm of South Korean intelligence agents: “Anti-communist activities were generally organized, promoted and legitimized by so-called ‘front’ organizations of the [South Korean] consulate and thus contributed to the promotion of ‘fear’ in the [Korean American] community” (Chang, 1988, 53). A pervasive legacy of the un-ended

Korean War is that Koreans in the United States must negotiate continuing Cold War cleavages within the community that impede open discussion about still-sensitive issues. Historically censored from within and policed from without, this form of political silence surfaces in Korean American reflections about the war.

Originally from the north, Min Yong Lee lived in Seoul, South Korea, with his mother and two sisters when the war broke out. During the war, several of his family members went north, making him vulnerable to accusations of being a communist sympathizer. After the war, he continued to live under a cloud of suspicion. Unable to envision a future for himself in South Korea, he immigrated to the United States to begin a new life.

I had brothers and a sister who fled to the north. Actually, I don't know if it was "fled" or not; I never asked. That was simply too painful for me. Even after the war, if people thought you had family in the north or worse, relatives who went to the north, it was really hard for you. If people asked me, "Did your family escape from the north?"-sort of an acceptable story, I just said, "Yes," proving I'm affiliated to the south. Then I am without any family history, no personal story. Separated families don't have any soul, any speech at all.... That is a kind of trauma for Koreans. I tried to be neutral but it's impossible. The only thing is to hide my identity.

But in the U.S., we're *still* under the influence of ideology. We paint family stories with political issues and then we're scared and we hide it all. No chance to open ourselves. No personal history after 50 years, no real identity. (italics added)

The politics of Cold War censorship and silencing persist beyond the immigrant generation. Born in Michigan and now living on the East Coast, Orson Moon was 32 years old when he offered his story, his parents having come to the United States in the sixties. His experience attests to the fact that even second-generation Korean Americans are not immune to community silencing.

When I first learned the stories about my grandfather and father's experiences during the war, a lot of things just fell right into place, and it was as though a weight had been lifted from me. My first reaction was not shame or denial; I felt a lot of joy and I felt a real strong sense of purpose. At the same time though, my dad told me to be *careful and not to tell anyone else about this*. So after all the years, my father was still very afraid. (italics added)

The Cold War has not ended in the Korean American community because the Cold War still rages on the Korean peninsula. Sixty-two years following the end of active battle in Korea and more than two decades since the collapse of the Berlin Wall, a climate of uncertainty and ideological suspicion still mediates Korean American community relations. For some like Lee and Moon's father, Cold War fear is manifested internally in the suppression of private memories of the war and outwardly, in striking Korean American silence about the Korean War.

Although overt ideological policing of the community has abated considerably in the wake of the movement toward democratization in South Korea, the fear of being politically stigmatized remains and is periodically exacerbated whenever state-level conflict on the Korean peninsula and between the United States and North Korea intensifies. One Korean American interviewee from the San Francisco area described conversations about the war as invariably explosive:

This is the first time I will talk about the Korean War. I don't like to talk because I don't want to argue. Even when my friends talk about it, they get into arguments. Some say the north

attacked first, others say no, it was the south. So every time—arguments. I will talk now, *just* about my own experience, *just* in the Seoul area. (italics added)

## VI. The Intergenerational Legacy of Cold War Fear

The Korean War is enshrined as “forgotten” in U.S. collective memory, and fears of reigniting Cold War conflict linger in the Korean American community. Each condition contributes to silencing public discourse about the past *and* is a manifestation of the as-yet un-ended Korean War. Silence can also be nurtured in intimate family relationships, fostering a stifling atmosphere of foreboding for children that arises from sensed but unknown dangerous pasts. These troubling gaps in family history are often the only connection to the conflict for the postwar generation. Of her mother’s deep anxieties around the war, Chung Hong stated: “my mother had a lot of insecurity herself from the war.... Even though she didn’t talk about it, the fear she had was so imbedded in her mind that I could almost *hear* that fear.” Similarly, Orson Moon describes reverberations from the war as a climate of fear: “My life seemed a lot like lots of other kids around me but there always seemed to be this tension and anxiety, which was sort of blowing through my family like an unhappy wind and there were silences....”

Scholars and clinicians have proposed the concept of the “double wall” or “conspiracy of silence” to capture the interpersonal dynamics in families with legacies of historical trauma. (Danielli, 1998). Survivors do not talk about the past because of the pain of remembering and the wish to shield loved ones from the horrors of they experienced, and children and grandchildren hesitate to ask for fear of upsetting elders *and* what they might actually learn. Silence is the product of this protective collusion. A senior in college at the time of his interview, Charles Hong described the delicacy of inquiring about his mother’s experience of the war: “I feel uncomfortable asking my mother those kinds of questions, you know, about her life during the war.... You know, sometimes you just don’t want to know or hear about sad things.” Moon alludes to a similar source of family silences:

The fear and terror of this time period have carried forward into my dad’s life. It is visible; if you ever met him, you’d understand what it meant. It’s carried forward to my sisters’ lives, my life, as a hole, a silence, and in order to move forward into my own life and everything that it means in the present and everything that it can mean in the future, I really feel I have to release the past from this prison of silence.

Erased from public consciousness by self-serving official nationalist narratives, rendered unspeakable within a community fractured by Cold War ideological divisions, and absent from conversations at the dinner table, Korean American family histories of the Korean War have often been lost to newer generations. Silence around the Korean War has deprived them of a deeper understanding of their origins and place within a Korean diasporic community whose roots trace back to a still un-ended war.

Helen Kim: There’s a lot of what we don’t know, which was never passed down to us. Our parents complain that we don’t know anything about our history. But they never want to talk about that shameful part of history. How the hell were we supposed to know? If Americans don’t think it was a big deal, and if our parents don’t want to talk about it, where are we going to find this information?

## VII. The Limits of PTSD as a Discourse of War

Trauma-related silence is implied in virtually all of the survivor comments in this essay—in, for example, the palpable fear of Chung Hong’s mother who never spoke of the war and the dark moods of

Orson Moon's father who warned against telling anyone about his wartime past. Told in the present tense, Suntae Chun's description of the detonation of a bomb has the sensory dimensions typical of the flashbacks that accompany post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD):

Very close to me, a bomb exploded one time. You cannot hear anymore for a while and you think, you will die and you feel like all kinds of shrapnel are in your body. Since that time, almost everyday, both my eardrums just blocked and you cannot hear outside sounds. A minute and then it's gone. That lasts for thirty, forty, fifty years.

Yet, a note of caution: following its post-Vietnam War classification by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980, PTSD has become ubiquitous in U.S. popular culture as a shorthand explanation for the loss of voice that often accompanies severe trauma. Understood in psychological terms, silence can be construed as an intrapsychic response to unresolved, extreme threats to the self. Viewed in both popular and medical discourse as a component of PTSD, silence, as the outward expression of suppressed life-threatening experiences, can be regarded as a reflexive act of self-preservation in the face of overwhelming stressors. In its place, trauma is conveyed indirectly through flashbacks, irritability, dramatic mood swings, and erratic behavior.

Attributing silence exclusively or principally to PTSD, however, is extremely problematic especially when there are powerful vested interests behind official accounts of traumatic events like war. Doing so medicalizes and pathologizes the loss of voice among survivors, attributing the origins of silence to an individual's trauma-induced disorder and thereby obscuring broader, systemic forces that work to mute "perilous" memories of the past.

## VIII. Silent No More

In the years since I first began collecting Korean American oral histories of the Korean War as part of the "Korean American Remember the Korean War" project, exciting new initiatives for gathering and sharing Korean War testimonials have begun to proliferate. They vary in method, format, and goals but promise wider participation by members of the Korean diaspora in the United States in shaping the collective memory of the war and its aftermath. The following outline of several recent projects illustrates this development and the potential for future growth. .

*Still Present Pasts: Korean Americans and the "Forgotten War"* ([www.stillpresentpasts.org](http://www.stillpresentpasts.org), 2005) is the work of a Korean and Korean American artist collective inspired by oral history voices from the "Korean Americans Remember the Korean War" project (Kim, 2006). It includes installation, performance, and interactive art; documentary film; archival photographs; and historical context. As a space of public memory, the exhibit evokes individual, family, and community reflection about the past and simultaneously grapples with the erasure of the Korean War in the U.S. national narrative. On tour nationally and in Korea for nearly eight years, it reached large and diverse audiences. Comments of attendees ranged from "How could I have forgotten?" to "I wish I had known before my grandma died" to "I've never told this story before" to "For those who suffered, I apologize." The power of art and storytelling to break silences is evident in this message from a second-generation Korean American woman:

We went to the exhibit with my father.... The stories came pouring out almost immediately.... The art really opened him up so he was like freely associating all over the place.... The most enlightening moment for me was afterwards. My dad told us how they fled his mother's hometown...the long walk with baby cousin Jae Hyun balanced on the top of a wheelbarrow full of belongings...no gimchi, no rice.... All they had was potatoes, potatoes, potatoes.... To this day my dad hates potatoes...and on and on and on...

*Intergenerational Stories to Break the Silence: A Korean-American Oral History Project* (<https://asianamoralhistory.wordpress.com/about/>) is a new community-based initiative of the organization, Nodutdol for Korean Community Development, in New York City ([www.nodutdol.org/](http://www.nodutdol.org/)). It was begun by second-generation Korean Americans with the aim of filling in missing parts of their personal, family, and community histories; bridging divides within the community; disrupting prevailing war and immigrant narratives; and creating new, collaborative work within and across Asian American communities. What stands out about this work is the use of a collaborative, oral-history method in which interviewers and interviewees and at times, audiences, all participate in the setting of goals, story-telling and interpretation, and creating programs for the wider public. This participatory process is an egalitarian approach to uncovering the past that also builds support for community organizing in pursuit of justice for war survivors and related community needs.

The members of this project also created the *Asian American Oral History Collective*, a collaboration of oral history initiatives taking place in other Asian American communities in New York City. According to this collective, “The Asian American Oral History Collective is a group of Asian-American artists and organizers dedicated to the use of oral history to share the stories of Asian-American communities that are often untold or hidden. Our oral history projects are in support of and collaboration with social movements” (<https://asianamoralhistory.wordpress.com/about/>). The group is currently experimenting with creative visual and performance arts organizations like Theater of the Oppressed to convey the oral histories they have gathered and to engage new audiences in contributing their stories. *Intergenerational Stories to Break the Silence: A Korean-American Oral History Project* represents an innovative approach to uncovering the untold legacies of the Korean War. Beyond facilitating storytelling, it also mobilizes new constituencies for action within the U.S. Korean diaspora and works in collaboration with partners in other immigrant and low-income Asian American communities. As a community-based project, it aims to transform oral-history work and to empower Korean American communities relative to their own histories.

*Missing Pieces* (<http://www.missingpiecesusa.org/#!mission/cjg9>) is entirely the product of second- and third-generation Korean American high school students. Created in 2013 by students participating in the K. W. Lee Center for Leadership (<http://www.kwleecenter.org/>) summer training program for youth in the Los Angeles area, this initiative was inspired by the desire “to learn the history of Los Angeles and the relations between us and the first generation Korean Americans.” As a leading member of this exciting, oral-history project has stated: “The heartbreaking stories of division and loss that we heard from the forgotten elders of our community moved us to initiate a change to give back to the elders in our community.” Insofar as it addresses the complexities of the Korean War from a community-based lens, including the war’s intergenerational impact within the Korean American community, *Missing Pieces* possesses unique prospects for reaching and galvanizing other youth in the U.S. Korean diaspora. The project seeks out and preserves elders’ memories of the war and family division, which may be unknown to many youth yet are vital to Korean American history. In addition to interviewing their own relatives, members of the *Missing Pieces* project discovered local associations of elders whose hometowns are located in different regions of North Korea. They attended monthly meetings of these groups and discovered animated elders willing to share their firsthand accounts of the war. Some of these oral histories are included in the Legacies of War online archive (<http://www.legaciesofthekoreanwar.org/>). They have also partnered with the National Coalition for the Divided Families (<http://www.dfusa.org/>) whose mission is to advocate for congressional support to enable Koreans residing in the United States to reunite with relatives in North Korea. Recently, they participated in a U.S. congressional hearing testifying to the urgent need for a pathway to family reunions for the thousands of elderly Korean Americans separated from relatives, many of whom are rapidly passing away.

Recent projects like *Missing Pieces* and *Intergenerational Stories to Break the Silence: A Korean-American Oral History Project* promise to play a critical role in breaking the silence about the Korean War by engaging a new generation of young people in speaking out about legacies of war that remain a specter in their elders' lives but also, as they are discovering, their own.

#### IX. Far from the Final Word

The Korean War continues to haunt the lives of survivors and their descendants through memories and legacies silenced by trauma, Cold War divisions within the U.S. diasporic community, and the disciplinary authority of official state narratives. The invisibility of the war within the wider public bears another cost—ignorance of how today's conflicted relations among the principle war combatants, South Korea and the United States, and North Korea and China, are exacerbated by unresolved hostilities from the un-ended Korean War. Critical public discussion about the vested interests behind the Cold War narrative of the origins, conduct, and aftermath of that war has, for the most part, been virtually taboo. Without an informed public, the Korean War and its geopolitical and human legacies are destined to endure—a Cold War bequest for the generations to come.

The new voices that are beginning to be heard within the Korean diasporic community in the United States offer a modest prospect for breaking the silence, raising awareness of the continuing human costs of the un-ended Korean War, and rethinking U.S. policy regarding the Korean peninsula. Silent no more, Koreans in the U.S. diaspora are enabling and inviting each other to speak their own truths about the Korean War; in so doing, they are challenging the dominance of statist war narratives and laying the foundation for creating a collective consciousness and prospects for a meaningful voice in how the Korean War is to be remembered and resolved.

#### Notes

1. It is important to note that the historic 2000 summit meeting followed on the heels of what would in retrospect be something of a testimonial decade, with comfort women survivors speaking out in the early 1990s and the Korean War massacre at Nogunri exploding in the national media by the end of the decade. ("GIs Massacred Civilians in S. Korea, Veterans Say." Associated Press, 1999; see also, Hanley, C., Choe, S., and Mendoza, M. 2002). This was the inter-Asian decade in which the prospects of reconciliation across Cold War divides loomed large with possibility all across Asia.
2. For a literary analysis of the Korean War as forgotten, see D. McCann (1998), *Our Forgotten War: The Korean War in Korean and American Popular Culture*.

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