On August 1, 1936, the popular magazine *Samchŏlli* published the responses of prominent cultural figures to the query of how to define Korean literature (Chosŏn munhak). Intended to provoke debates, the paragraph-long question draws attention to the difficulty of delimiting a national literature to an ethnically homogeneous group and their shared language by listing a few possible counterarguments:

According to the widely accepted opinion, to be fully qualified as Korean literature, it must be written A) in the Korean language; B) by Korean writers; C) for Korean readers. If so, I will list a few counterexamples:

A) Do we exclude Pak Chiwŏn’s *Yŏnam ilgi* (The Jehol Diary) and Il Yŏn’s *Samguk yusa* (The Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms) from Korean literature because they are written in literary Chinese (*hanmun*)? Tagore published *Gitanjali* in English, and so did Synge, Gregory, and Yeats their [respective] works, but the former is viewed as Indian literature, the latter as Irish literature. In such cases, how do we define the relationship between literature and language?

B) If the author must be Korean, is it right to exclude those written by non-ethnic Koreans but entirely from the Korean point of view such as Nakanishi Inosuke’s “Nanjira no haigo yori” (Behind You)?

C) If it should be only intended for Korean readers, should we leave out what Chang Hyŏkchu often published in Tokyo or those targeted toward Anglo-American readers such as Kang Yonghŭl [Younghill Kang]’s *The Grass Roof*?

The eleven participants in this virtual forum, including novelists, critics, playwrights, journalists, linguists, translators, and independent scholars, are able to reach a consensus only on the exclusion of Nakanishi’s sympathetic depiction of Korean society in Japanese from the domain of Korean literature. Each suggests one of the following three factors—language, authors’ ethnicity, and readership—is more decisive than the others, and a few of them—such as the Marxist critic Im Hwa (1908–53) and the Francophile literary critic and translator Yi Hŏn’gu (1905–82)—go on to propose a more sophisticated definition of national literature. Nevertheless, what divides
the respondents most sharply is the question whether to consider as works of Korean literature those written by ethnic Korean authors like Younghill Kang and Chang Hyŏkchu in a foreign language. The simulated discussion, therefore, ends up revealing a tension in the notion of national literature and its ethno-logocentric norms: to maintain the linguistic and ethnic purity of national language, one has to exclude all works not written in the vernacular script, but in so doing, in the case of Korean literature, one leaves out all the sinographic literature, the bulk of the work by ethnic Koreans before the 1900s. That is to say, the ethno-logocentric model of national literature is built on the fragile fantasy of “pure” language entirely owned by a homogeneous ethnonational community.

There is no such thing as pure language “uninfected” by other languages—to borrow linguist Koh Jongsok’s characterization. Nor is there such a thing as a pure national literature unadulterated by literatures in other languages or by voices of those who have lived outside the national boundaries. Younghill Kang’s (Kang Younghŭl, 1903–72) English-language autobiographical novel The Grass Roof (1931) and Chang Hyŏkchu’s (Noguchi Kakuchū, 1905–97) Japanese-language proletarian short story “Hell of the Starving” (Gakidō, 1932) bring to the fore the often-muted “impurity” of a literary tradition—be it Korean, American, or Japanese—and unsettle the boundaries of national literature by portraying life in Korea by means of another language.

This chapter calls attention to a rather quixotic attempt to challenge the dominant ethno-linguistic premise of national literature by analyzing the short story “A Pitiful Grave” (Kanryon chŏk pumnyo), written by the early Korean American writer Nak Chung Thun (Chŏn Nakch’ŏng, 1879?–1953). I contend that “A Pitiful Grave” was implicitly intended for a broad range of American audiences beyond Korean émigrés readership, including European descents and Chinese immigrants, though it was written in a language illegible to most of them. As I will discuss later on, the story was found among a pile of manuscripts posthumously donated to the University of Southern California East Asia Library by the author’s daughter, Ellen Thun, all of which have been collected in what is now called the Nak Chung Thun Archive. “A Pitiful Grave” neither portrays a single Korean or a person of Korean descent, nor is it set in Korea or in an overseas Korean community.

Certainly, Thun’s short story is not the first Korean fiction depicting only non-ethnic Korean characters in a non-Korean setting. Especially before the 1900s, for example, Korean writers often set their fictional narratives in one of the Chinese dynasties, exclusively depicting Chinese figures, as in the case with The Nine Cloud Dream (Kuunmong) or The Tale of Cho Ung (Cho Ung chŏn). Also, some of the early-twentieth-century political novels published in a San Francisco–based Korean-language newspaper, Sinhan minbo (The New Korea), fictionalize anti-imperialist activists in European colonies such as Poland and Serbia as allegories of the current political condition of Korea. However, as far as these works engage with moral or political questions relevant to their contemporary Korean readers, their uses of non-Korean characters and settings do not obscure their intended primary readership. Nak Chung Thun’s “A Pitiful Grave” is distinguished from them in the sense that it intervenes in the racial politics of the United States, most likely in the late 1920s and early 1930s: it portrays an interracial romance and marriage between a British man and a Chinese woman—a theme unknown to the existing archive of twentieth-century Korean literature—to criticize the racist marriage law in effect in a number of states in the United States.

It is not known why none of Thun’s works ever appeared in print, although they are hardly inferior to those published in Sinhan minbo. It is likely, however, that even if his works had been made into this newspaper during his lifetime, they would have been excluded from Korean literary scholarship. Despite the newspaper’s unmistakable advocacy of nationalist and anticolonialist causes during the colonial period, the Korean-language literary works published in
this transnational venue were treated at best as secondary to the national literary canon by later critics and scholars. Locating Thun’s works in American literature poses a different challenge. Since works written in Korean have had no foothold in the exclusively English-language corpus of Korean American or Asian American literature, the voices of those who tried to make sense of their experience of migrating to the other side of the Pacific in their native tongue remain inaudible to American audiences.

And yet it is not my goal to carve out a space for diasporic writers like Thun either in the canon of Korean national literature or in that of American or Asian American literature. Instead, I propose to examine “A Pitiful Grave” as a “transpacific” text while focusing on how it appropriates an array of traditional and contemporary narratives drawn from both sides of the Pacific—including early colonial Korean fiction, traditional Chinese literature, and classic Hollywood cinema—to imagine an alternative relationship between Asians and Anglo-Americans. By the term transpacific, I do not simply mean works by diasporic writers who lived on both sides of the Pacific Ocean. Indeed, early Korean American writers often do not display explicit signs of migration in their literary works, imagining themselves as short-term visitors to the United States and no less “Korean” than their compatriots who never left the Korean Peninsula. Therefore, their works can be easily aligned with nation-centered literary history. Janet Hoskins and Viet Thanh Nguyen suggest that transpacific studies “start[s] from the premise that both sides of the Pacific must be taken into account” and “acknowledges the importance of American power but stresses the necessity of foregrounding Asia and the Pacific.” In the same vein, I argue that it becomes indispensable for understanding “A Pitiful Grave” to take into account transpacific encounters: it portrays culturally hybrid characters, delves into the issue of interracial romance and marriage between a man of European descent and an Asian woman, and most distinctively is marked by an implicit disjuncture between its intended readership and language. Next I will elaborate on how this short story draws on varied transpacific cultural heritages to challenge racism in the United States. In doing so, I will show what new avenues a probe into a newfound transpacific archive like that of Nak Chung Thun’s manuscripts might open up for future research.

The Nak Chung Thun archive

Nak Chung Thun emigrated from Chŏngju, a town located in P’yŏngando, the northwestern province of the Korean Peninsula, first to Hawaii on March 4, 1904, and then moved to California in 1907, spending his whole life in occupations that scholar officials like him would never imagine taking up in Korea—a laborer on sugar cane plantations, a fruit farmer in orange groves, a railroad section hand, a ranch hand, a gardener, and a member of the dish crew in a cafeteria—namely those often left to migrant workers of the time. Unlike many of those who were recruited to work in Hawaii or on the West Coast of North America as bachelors, he was accompanied by his extended family—his wife, father, older brother, sister-in-law, and three young nephews. The size of the family had more than doubled by 1918, with seven children born to him and his wife Ruth and five more children to his brother and sister-in-law. When moving to California with his wife and children, he took his two older nephews, Frank and Jacob Dunn (Chŏn), with him, so that they would be educated on the US mainland. Back in Korea, Nak Chung Thun and his wife had considered adopting his brother’s second son, Kyuang Moo Dunn, who was later given a new name, Jacob (1899–1947), as their own, because they were childless for the first three years after getting married, despite their efforts to have children. They always treated him like their own son, even after their seven children were born one after another. For this reason, Jacob depicts the couple more frequently and affectionately than
his biological parents in his unfinished autobiography, “The Quest in Exile,” which is a useful source regarding Thun’s life and work. Providing for their seven children and two nephews on an itinerant immigrant laborer’s unstable and meager income took a toll on him but even more so on his wife. Once a genteel, industrious, and kindhearted woman who had a bit of modern education, thanks to her brief upbringing in an orphanage run by Korean Christian women before the First Sino-Japanese War, Ruth succumbed to severe mental illness in 1919, likely due to continual childbirths on top of doing what was needed for the family to survive. Thun had to leave his five younger ones in the care of an orphanage for some years because he was unable to take care of all of his children by himself.

Besides being an amateur diasporic writer, Thun’s lifelong struggle with the drudgery of manual labor set him apart from the major canonical writers of modern Korean literature, whose high level of education and elite social status for the most part saved them from that type of work—even when they lived in poverty or were labeled as “proletarian writers” at some point of their writerly careers. As I have already briefly mentioned above, he was not always an economically distressed immigrant worker. Ellen Thun recollects that while in Korea, Nak Chung Thun, the youngest but also smartest among his male siblings, was spared from economic activities (as other yangban families, even those of modest means, usually did) so that he could pursue his ambition as a literatus with the hope of bringing honor to the family—a custom rooted in millennium-long practices of civil service examinations. Even though the state’s abolition of this age-old institution in 1894 deprived him of the opportunity to fashion a career based on his literary merits, the rest of the family, including his older brother, Nak Joon, respected him as the most cultured and knowledgeable one in the family and relied on him to make sense of the rapidly changing social conditions in fin-de-siècle Korea. According to Jacob Dunn, it was Nak Chung Thun’s idea to migrate to the United States. Similar to those who moved to Hawaii during the time, Nak Chung Thun and his family were naïvely lured by the rumor of “streets” “paved of shining gold” in the United States. At the same time, the family had a good reason for moving to the other side of the Pacific Ocean. After visiting Seoul, Nak Chung Thun reported to his family that a war was looming between Russia and Japan. Not only did the family have a vivid memory of how their whole town had been ransacked during the recent war between China and Japan (1894–6), but they were also fully aware of the Korean government’s inability to protect them from being affected by another war between foreign powers. They needed a safe place to live. Nak Chung Thun repeated what he heard in Seoul to his family: “The government” in ‘mekuk’ (mi’guk, the United States) “is just and beneficent.” The day after the lunar New Year’s Day of 1904, the family left for the port of Kobe and transferred to a steamship bound for Honolulu. They were indeed unrecognized war refugees.

Despite the radical transition from a man “honored by the village” to a migrant laborer, Nak Chung Thun continued to cultivate a forward-looking vision for the future of his homeland while putting his beliefs into practice in his own small ways. Just two years after his move to Hawaii, he made a donation equivalent to 10 percent of a Korean male plantation worker’s monthly salary to the United Korean Association (Kongnip hyönphoe, 1905–9)—the overseas Korean political organization founded in San Francisco by An Ch’angho (1878–1938)—to provide financial aid for Korean students pursuing degrees in the United States. After moving to the Pachappa camp—a Korean settlement that An Ch’angho built in Riverside, California, in 1907—Thun joined the United Korean Association as a representative of its local office. Along with two other Korean compatriots, he submitted a proposal to the United Korean Association that representatives of the organization be sent to the Hague Convention, even though the convention had been underway for almost a week at that point. In 1913, Thun’s name appeared in a segment called “Q & A” (mundap p’yŏn) in Sinhan minbo, which featured the editorial board’s
answers to selected questions submitted by their subscribers. Thun’s questions paint him as an ardent advocate of patriotism and democracy: “What should we do to make Korea’s independence happen?” and “Would the United Korean Association continue to support democracy even after independence?”

The eclectic nature of the Nak Chung Thun archive resists our attempts to draw direct connections between his life and his literary works. While it is certainly beyond the scope of this chapter to discuss the entire archive in detail, suffice it to say for the purpose of this chapter that none of Nak Chung Thun’s works are comfortably classified as autobiography, which Traise Yamamoto describes as “at once one of the most widely used genres in Asian American literature and the most controversial.” Of course, one can readily detect fragments of his life experience scattered across his works. Yi Jiyoung observes that Thun’s full-length novels are in one way or another inspired by the Hong Kyŏngnae rebellion of 1812, which took place in the northwestern province of Korea and was crushed in the city wall of Chŏngju—Thun’s hometown. As Hwang Jae Moon notes, the male protagonist of his short story “May Flower” and its novella-length sequel “The Righteous Robber,” Jack Thun, has the name of the author’s third son and has much in common with the real-life Jack. The reader may catch a glimpse of Thun’s extensive knowledge about citrus farming in another short story of his, “A Motherless Cat,” which revolves around a white couple who owns an orange grove in Redland, California. It seems clear, nonetheless, that Thun’s characters do not mirror the author’s interiority or inner struggle the way that Chungpa Han does as Younghill Kang’s surrogate in his two autobiographical novels, The Grass Roof (1931) and East Goes West (1937).

As I will discuss further later on, Thun’s short story “A Pitiful Grave” instead adopts a narrative form popular among reform-minded Korean fiction writers in the early twentieth century that I elsewhere call the early colonial Korean domestic novel. Given his inadequate command of the English language, it may appear to be an inevitable choice for Thun to work in a genre of fiction familiar to the people in his home country, not to the American reading public. However, his reliance on his native language and culture should not be construed as evidence that he lived his whole life in the United States as an utter alien to the mainstream culture. Elaine H. Kim lays out what challenged first-generation Asian American writers:

In the face of pervasive American ignorance and antipathy toward Asians, an Asian writer could hardly know where to begin and what audience to address. Moreover, since they were segregated from mainstream of American social and economic life and prevented by law from becoming naturalized American citizens with voting and civil rights, many early immigrants did not learn English and did not consider the culture it represent something that belong to them and to which they could contribute.

Kim’s view that first-generation Asian Americans’ language barriers and difficulty in taking ownership of the mainstream culture that was hostile toward them led them to staying silent makes sense only when we limit our discussion exclusively to Anglophone work. The Nak Chung Thun archive shows that first-generation Asian Americans’ partial access to English did not necessarily stop them from understanding American culture, criticizing discriminatory laws and policies against Asians, or even thinking about how to undo perennial racism in the United States. In fact, I contend that Thun’s seeming constraints helped him to create a more subversive story, although the majority of American readers would not be able to understand it without the aid of translation and, equally important, without first learning how to listen to his story. Next is my preliminary attempt to make his voice heard by English-speaking audiences for the first time, more than half a century after his death.
"A Pitiful Grave": Sinicizing European descents, Westernizing the Chinese

What I refer to as the early colonial Korean domestic novel—which is arbitrarily classified as “new fiction” (sin sosŏl) in established Korean literary history—flourished between 1906 and 1915, when Japan’s colonization of Korea was still in the making. This new form of fiction emerged as reform-minded male writers began to recognize that fiction was an expedient means to disseminate national consciousness and capitalist modernity to the people. Casting off yang-ban literati’s age-old prejudice against fiction as an indecent and cheap form of entertainment suitable for women and uneducated commoners, writers creatively modified various traditional Korean narratives to spread their reformist tenets and to create a new national culture. Because burgeoning colonial censorship made it challenging for Koreans to discuss in the print media how to build a modern state, many of the reform-minded writers turned to the genre of the domestic novel to make manifest their political vision, portraying young women’s social Darwinist pursuit of modernity through Western or Western-style school education, the exercise of modern human rights, and egalitarian courtship and marriage. These novels tend to put women in charge of modernizing the nation and family, presuming that the future of Korea depends on their individual choices vis-à-vis education and marriage. These female characters are lacking in psychological depth or development, but they nonetheless make individual choices regarding marriage and education, which are taken to have immediate ramifications for their family and the nation within the chronotope of the early colonial domestic novel.

“A Pitiful Grave” recasts the early colonial Korean domestic novel as a rare transpacific interracial romance between culturally hybridized characters. There are unmistakable similarities between this short story and its early colonial Korean predecessors. Akin to the latter, Thun’s short story is recounted by a third-person omniscient narrator who frequently uses the verb ending tŏra, which places the speaker in an implicitly superior position of telling past events to the audience in hindsight. The narrator of “A Pitiful Grave,” just like that of the early colonial domestic novels, holds a conviction that at the core of social progress lies the reform of conjugal practices. In the opening paragraph of “A Pitiful Grave,” for example, the narrator casts himself as a passionate advocate of modernity while chastising one of the main female figures, Ruby Graham, for failing to live up to modern conjugal norms:

In Winnie peck, Canada, there lived a beautiful woman named Ruby Graham, who had lost her parents at five or six and was raised by her grandparents from that point on, and even though she went to Oxford University in England . . ., she was living like a walking corpse owing to her shyness and religious constraints. Who would be interested in a woman unknown to social circles, no matter how delicate her appearance is, and however excellent her academic record is? There was no one else but Ruby who did not even have a friend-like relationship with a man until she was 20 years old.

In the animated and self-assured tone of a political agitator, the narrator upbraids her for not having had a romantic relationship until age twenty. Why does Ruby’s avoidance of sex trouble the narrator so much? The latter’s vociferous reproach suggests that he views marriage and sexuality not only as her personal choice but also as a communal concern in which he has the right to intervene. This harkens back to the early-twentieth-century reformist fiction writers’ belief that the nation would move forward or lag behind depending on whether young women embrace modern conjugal norms such as courtship and “free” marriage or continue uncivilized marital practices like forced marriage, concubinage, or a widow’s lifelong chastity.
Given that a growing number of pundits considered the early colonial domestic novel unsuitable for educated readers and therefore unworthy of serious critical attention as early as in the late 1910s, Thun’s choice of genre for “A Pitiful Grave”—with its reference to the Nanjing government suggesting that it was completed after 1928—might seem outmoded to those familiar with canonical Korean literary history. However, it should be stressed that Thun revises the convention of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century genre in several significant ways. While sharing with his predecessors a version of the social Darwinist belief that collective survival and progress rely on the reform of marriage and sexuality, Thun distances himself from their Eurocentrism and consequent anti-Asian bias. Writers of the early colonial Korean domestic novel, whether wittingly or unwittingly, oblige their readers to place themselves under the scrutiny of the idealizing Western gaze by striving to convince the women of Korea to practice Western-originated gender norms. Thun offers a corrective to his predecessors’ uncritical acceptance of the superiority of Western civilization by portraying an introverted Christian woman of European ancestry instead of an old-fashioned Korean woman. Rather than purporting to exchange class-bound traditional Korean marriage customs for egalitarian modern conjugal practices, he questions the validity of the anti-miscegenation law in effect in California until 1948, and in doing so, he makes a literary intervention in the racially discriminatory politics of his time.40

In another radical departure from the genre of the early colonial Korean novel, “A Pitiful Grave” portrays a love triangle between a Canadian woman, a British man, and a Chinese woman, without a single ethnic Korean character. The main characters either are migrants or have experienced living outside their homeland, moving through extensive regions around the world such as Winnipeg, Oxford, Shanghai, Nanjing, and Singapore. Two of them defy rigid ethnic classification: George Hopkins was born and grew up in Nanjing while immersing himself in Chinese language and culture, and Chang Kangju, educated in the United States and in Switzerland, is no less Westernized, if not more, than the Oxford-graduate Canadian woman, Ruby Graham. The interracial love story between George and Kangju—both of whom are culturally hybrid characters—makes a case against anti-miscegenation laws, which prohibited intermarriage between white people and nonwhite people, especially between European and Asian descendants in the case of California. Given that a number of early colonial Korean domestic novels call for the reform of traditional marriage practices, Thun’s appropriation of this genre to criticize the racist marriage law in the United States is not just fitting. It is ingenious.

The story lays out two love stories one after the other, the one between Ruby and George and the other between Kangju and George. The former would look normative from the mainstream US perspective of the 1920s and 1930s: it is a heterosexual union between two highly educated European descendants. The latter, on the other hand, is transgressive and non-normative, not only because it is an interracial romance but also because the couple begins their relationship after George has gotten engaged to Ruby. Indeed, the name Kangju means “ruby” in Chinese, which unambiguously suggests that she is the Canadian woman’s doppelganger—her mirror image. As I discuss further later on, the parallel between the two love stories draws attention to the flawed nature of the contemporary conjugal norm in the United States, especially that of the law against interracial marriage.

The first encounter between Ruby and George sets the tone for their entire relationship. They meet at a dinner and dancing party that her maternal uncle, F. W. Gale, throws to welcome her a week after she moves to Shanghai to work with him at a missionary school. Her uncle “tacitly suggests that she should find a like-minded man (uihaphan namja)” among his guests.41 As if assuming that her marriage should be endogamous in terms of race, class, religion, and level of education, the uncle invites only young men and women of Anglo-American descent who, as children of missionaries or bankers, have graduated from elite
universities in the United States or in the United Kingdom, such as “Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, and Yale.”

At the party, Ruby indeed finds her perfect match, a twenty-eight-year-old British man, George Hopkins, the son of the inspector general of the Chinese Maritime Customs Service who is working for the Ministry of the Foreign Affairs of the Nanjing government and who is an alum of Oxford University, like her. Not surprisingly, her uncle Gale, who has taken up the role of Ruby’s father, could not be happier about the relationship.

“A Pitiful Grave” reads not only as a love story but also, akin to some of the early colonial domestic novel, as a fictionalized treatise on love marriage. Ruby and George often spend their time together discussing this issue, using the phrase “yo-nae haksŏl” (theory of love) to describe the topic. Their “theory of love” takes the form of a critique of traditional Chinese love stories on the one hand and that of contemporary Hollywood cinema on the other. Completely fluent in Chinese language and culture, George introduces Ruby to “Student Zhang and Ying-ying” from “Ying-ying’s Story” (C: Yingying zhuan, K: Yŏngyoŏng chŏn) as “well-known lovers in China.”

This ill-fated love story, in which the young couple’s secret affair ends with a painful breakup, upsets Ruby terribly, to the point that she has to drink water to calm down—even though it is not clear exactly how she interprets this open-ended tale from the Tang dynasty. George also mentions The Story of the Western Wing (C: Xixiang Ji, K: Sŏsang ki), The Plum in the Golden Vase (C: Jin Ping Mei, K: Kŭm pyŏng mae), and The Two Fair Cousins (C: Jujiaoli, K: Okkyori) as showcases of the Chinese theory of love, only to conclude that Chinese romance is always “either between a man and two women or between one woman and two men.” George and Ruby also talk about Hollywood films after watching “picture shows” (p’ikch’ŏsyou): one starring Norman Shearer (1902–83), a Canadian American actor who played “sexually adventurous” women in a number of Hollywood films between 1927 and 1942, and another starring Pola Negri (1897–1987), a Polish actor who appeared as the femme fatale in a number of European and Hollywood films between the 1910s and 1930s. Thun’s narrator says, “[the picture show about] Pola Negri’s love for a painter was somewhat impressive, but the one about Norma Shearer’s divorce was dull (mumī),” apparently speaking for the couple who have just finished watching the films. Further details about the films are omitted from the story, but it is plausible to assume that the depiction of a “divorce” makes the latter less entertaining to them because, in another scene, they talk about their uneasiness with films depicting a rivalry romance or love triangle.

Whereas the love story between George and Ruby emphasizes the two characters’ growth as a couple within the boundary of the racially, educationally, and religiously endogamous and heterosexual norms of love marriage, the love between Chang Kangju and George presents as precarious and even thrilling to a degree. George meets Kangju, a Chinese woman, on a business trip in Nanjing after he has promised to marry Ruby. Kangju resembles a Hollywood flapper whose lack of concerns with morality George and Ruby discuss with disdain. When Kangju appears in the story for the first time, the narrator begins to take on George’s voice in a free, indirect style, giving such details of her appearances as the shape of her face (“heart-shaped face” instead of “the moon-shaped face, which is more common among Chinese women”), the type of dress that she is wearing (“Chinese-style summer dress”), and the brand name of her Italian handbag (Schiparelli). George, along with the narrator, marvels at her beauty by comparing her to a hibiscus (C: furong, K: puyong), a symbol of an attractive woman in traditional East Asian culture, and concludes she must be a romantic type (aejŏng i manŭn), on the basis of a quick physiognomic analysis of her face. To show George’s fascination with Kangju, the author uses an old Chinese set phrase “yuhua erdeng xian” (K: uhwa idŏng sŏn); while looking at her, he feels like he is “becoming as light as a feather, ascending to the heaven, and turning into an immortal.”

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is love at first sight—at least on George’s part, since Kangju’s first impression of George remains unknown to the reader. Kangju presents as a transgressive temptress under George’s male gaze: she shows no qualms about holding George’s hand when they have barely finished introductions, inviting him to her uncle’s house for lunch the same day, wearing see-through clothes in public, and kissing him the second time she sees him.46

Notably, what makes Kangju attractive to George is not only her beauty but also her intelligence and familiarity with Western culture. He notices her at first because she is writing something horizontally, instead of in a vertical column, hinting that she has command of a European language. Using this observation as his pickup line, he asks her why she is writing that way, and she responds by talking about her education in the United States and Switzerland. As in the case with a number of traditional East Asian love stories, poetry serves as an accelerator of romance in “A Pitiful Grave,” even though this time it is written in English, not in literary Chinese. She has been writing a poem. After reading it, George calls her a “genius.” She is depicted as an avid reader of “all kinds of love stories from Europe and the United States”47 and a believer in “free love.”48 Thus, Kangju and George have common ground, inasmuch as they challenge the idea of culture as closed domains. Their ability to speak two languages fluently and to appreciate both cultures helps them freely move across boundaries.

In Thun’s short story, the understanding of identity is filtered through Herbert Spencer’s idea of social Darwinism—which maintains that there is a hierarchy among national, ethnic, or racial groups and that society evolves according the rule of the “survival of the fittest.” Yet the story takes this influential theory of evolution as a site of contestation rather than as a priori knowledge.49 In the early colonial domestic novel, the social Darwinist assessment of Korea as “half-civilized” drives female characters in particular to acquire a Westernized education, seek changes in the traditional family structure, pursue a companionship-based conjugal tie, and exercise their individual rights. First of all, some of the characters who subscribe to the fixed hierarchy with the West on top do not know how to understand cultural differences outside the contemporary paradigm of civilizational hierarchy: Westernization means upward mobility, and Sinicization brings one down the social ladder. Ruby’s uncle, Dr. Gale, makes this point rather explicit: “Young British and American men and women in Shanghai are ... misled by Chinese morals.” That George, despite being a cultural hybrid, has internalized a hierarchical understanding of humanity is clear when he discusses his marriage to Kangju with his father. George’s father, trying to persuade his indecisive son to choose “a woman of the same race,” goes on to say that “As I haven’t met Kangju, I can’t say for sure what she is like. However, the fact that she studied in Europe and the United States suggests that she must be a loose woman. And she is a half-civilized race, isn’t she?” George refers to social Darwinism to argue against his father’s view: “Cosmopolitan interracial marriage is getting more and more popular every day. Our white folks in Africa marry uncivilized black natives. You are talking about Kangju’s chastity, but people drink someone else’s leftover alcohol and sleep on a bed where others have slept. I will choose the winner (usŭngja), whether Ruby or Kangju” (my emphasis). In other words, George’s understanding of social Darwinism is more cosmopolitan than other white male characters in the story, although, as we can see from his comment on “black natives,” it still maps out global cultural differences through the dichotomy between “civilized” and “uncivilized.” George says that neither the two women’s races nor their chastity will play a part in his decision—he will marry the woman who wins him over. Ruby tries hard to convince him to marry her while keeping him from seeing her rival, but he eventually elopes with Kangju to Singapore, a British colony, where they marry in a Methodist church (after a Roman Catholic church refuses to
administer their marriage). Later, he explains to his father why he has chosen Kangju over his Canadian fiancée:

“Children born of a yellow parent and a white parent (hwangbaek honhyŏl) grow up to have a lucid mind and a superior body (sinch’ŏng kolsu). I was thinking about choosing Ruby seriously because of her race. If Kangju is a living being who can kill, save, sadden, or please me, Ruby is a mannequin displayed in a women’s clothing store. How can I have a pleasant and happy life with an emotionally unavailable mannequin? In addition, white women treat their parents-in-law as worn-out shoes, but Chinese women respect them more than their own parents.”

To put it another way, George chooses Kangju, on the one hand, because he feels emotionally connected to her and, on the other, because he believes that marrying her would benefit his family: their children will be eugenically superior and, as a Chinese woman, she will take care of his parents. Kangju wins out over her rival because of her Chinese heritage and her feminine allure and intelligence. George thus selects the “fittest” of the two women, against the grain of the deterministic discourse of the Eurocentric racial and cultural hierarchy.

Thun’s depiction of an interracial marriage between a British man and a Chinese woman as not only permissible but also scientifically desirable seems striking, especially when we recall that until 1948 anti-miscegenation laws criminalized sexual intimacy, cohabitation, and marriage between white people and nonwhite people in California, where the author spent most of his adult life and wrote this story. These laws grew out of the Victorian debates on race hybridity, in particular the position of a “polygenist,” who, on the premise of “separate origins for the different human races,” believed “racial amalgamation was unnatural, abhorrent, and detrimental.” George’s comment on the superiority of mixed-race children of a parent of European descent and one of Asian descent situates the point of view of him and perhaps that of the story’s author closer to that of a “monogenist,” who claimed that race mixture would result in improvement, on the basis of the belief that human races stemmed from a common origin. Even though the monogenists offered a theoretical frame for the critique of the ban on interracial marriage, they did not necessarily steer clear of the idea of racial hierarchy. For example, the Meiji and late Qing race theorists, such as Takahashi Yoshio, Yi Nai, and Kang Youwei, took a monogenist perspective but proposed to overcome the purported inferiority of the “yellow” race through interracial marriage with European descents. I should add that Thun’s race theory departs from that of Chinese and Japanese advocates of interracial marriage insofar as he acknowledges the advantage of racial hybridity is not founded on the biological determinism of racial hierarchy. Kangju shows no sign of biological disadvantage compared to Ruby; the former’s multicultural fluency makes her more attractive than and superior to the latter.

Perhaps predictably, given the era, the marriage between Kangju and George is short-lived, as the three main characters kill themselves one after the other almost immediately after the wedding. Aficionados or scholars of golden-age American cinema will find this plot familiar, because a small number of classic Hollywood films focusing on interracial romance between white people and Asians often end with an affirmation of existing racial boundaries by killing off those involved in interracial love, either both (Broken Blossoms, 1919) or one of them (The Bitter Tea of General Yen, 1933). Michael Wood observes that “miscegenation looms large in several types of movies, but all it leaves behind is a trail of very pallid good intentions and a lot of early deaths” (129). In Isabella Santaolalla’s words, “for Hollywood—for many Americans at the time—the idea of a mixed-marriage was inconceivable as a happy ending.”
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Unlike classic Hollywood representations of interracial marriage, however, the overdramatic and abrupt ending of “A Pitiful Grave” does not necessarily discard a subversive implication of the mixed marriage between George and Kangju. On the contrary, Thun’s aspirations for undoing racism are spelled out even more clearly in his account of the main characters’ deaths. According to classic Hollywood convention, the death of someone who has not broken mainstream racial codes like Ruby would be unnecessary. In “A Pitiful Grave” Ruby’s death plays a crucial role because her suicide note makes it clear that her fight for George’s love was about the racial rivalry between Anglo-Saxons and Asians as much as about her personal feelings for him. Notably, her last words are addressed to “Anglo-Saxon women” rather than to her ex-fiancé or even to her uncle, who acts as her surrogate parent. Toward the end of her note, she writes, “If I carry on my life with this shame, I will not only let myself feel disgraced as an individual but also end up subjecting all Anglo-Saxon women to humiliation.” In other words, her decision to kill herself stems from the belief that her individual failure has a direct impact on Anglo-Saxon women as a group. Kangju’s suicide note, on the other hand, declares the writer as a cosmopolitan figure with borderless compassion and sisterhood: “A Canadian Kangju died for a Chinese Kangju. If the Chinese Kangju doesn’t kill herself for the Canadian Kangju, she would be the same as a lower animal, who has no sense of honor or love.” Kangju even asks George to bury her alongside Ruby. George’s last words similarly highlight his cosmopolitanism, while at the same time referencing his Sinicized identity as a filial son. Before killing himself with a six-chamber revolver (yukhyŏlp’o), he writes, “I committed a terrible sin against mankind (illyu sahoe). I have no choice but to atone for my sin by killing myself. Please forgive me for being undutiful to my parents (pulhyo). I wish that you bury my body with Ruby and Kangju” (my emphasis). Even though it is not clear exactly what he means by his “sin,” George’s last words stress his assimilated Chinese identity as well as his global citizenship, markedly making no mention of his privileged birthright as an Anglo-Saxon man or a European descendant.

In the fictive world of “A Pitiful Grave,” one’s “personal” choices regarding marriage and education thus have a direct ramification on the entire society. This is one of the themes that Thun borrows from the early colonial domestic novel. As I have briefly mentioned earlier, the paradigmatic characters of this genre do not have well-developed interiority or insulated secrets to be discovered by perceptive readers. They are action driven, and their individual identities are inseparable from their communal belongings. The early colonial domestic novel openly promotes the idea that women can help the nation move forward by adopting Western-influenced modern domestic norms, such as by choosing their spouse instead of marrying the one picked out by their parents, investing in their own education, refusing to marry too young or to become a concubine, or refusing to spend the rest of their life as a chaste widow after the loss of a husband. Similarly, in Thun’s short story, George’s and Kangju’s cross-cultural education and interracial romance signify a step toward a racially egalitarian and harmonious world. If George’s choice of Kangju over Ruby means, as Ruby’s suicide note suggests, the Anglo-Saxon’s loss to the Chinese in the social Darwinist rivalry between the two races, Kangju’s suicide is an attempt to affirm borderless sisterhood and love for humanity in the face of the brutal competition between races.

At the same time, the narrative form developed by early-twentieth-century Korean reformist writers is modified by Thun in “A Pitiful Grave” in several subversive ways. In this story, those who envision their communal belongings only within a monoracially or monoethnically bounded domain are no longer glorified as architects of social progress. In their place, he draws attention to “cultural hybrids” who transgress racial and ethnic borders through romance and education, projecting a utopian vision for an alternative community unfettered by racism. Whereas the early colonial fiction writers grapple with how to build a strong modern nation
in response to imperialist intrusions, Thun raises what was likely one of the most pressing questions for him and other immigrant writers: how to overcome racial disparities? Unlike his Korean predecessors, Thun does not shift the responsibility solely onto those less powerful—that is, domestic women—even though he does stress that women, whether East Asian or North American, should adopt modern domestic norms to help society move forward. Instead, he proposes something utterly unimaginable to those who were publishing their works under the watchful eyes of colonial censors in early colonial Korea: change the most powerful—Orientalize male European descents—not by force but by teaching them how to appreciate Asian culture.

While the subversive imagination of “A Pitiful Grave” was undeniably enabled by the author’s language barrier, one should not attribute Thun’s radical viewpoint solely to his possible assumption that American readers would not be able to read his work. In fact, though written in Korean, “A Pitiful Grave” is not necessarily cut out to indulge a contemporary Korean émigré readership. Other Korean-language literary works published in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s scarcely address issues related to the racial tension between European descents and Asians; the handful of texts that do touch upon these issues are not as nearly transgressive as “A Pitiful Grave.” Written from an ethnonationalist perspective, they unwittingly give the nod to racial segregation and anti-miscegenation laws by depicting characters engaging in interracial romance or marriage and children born out of such relationships as untrustworthy.

Thun’s story radically diverges from such a narrative pattern to the extent that it characterizes interracial marriage not as a threat to the homogeneity of the ethnic Korean community but as a step toward a racially egalitarian global society. No matter how naïve Thun’s cosmopolitanism may seem to today’s readers, “A Pitiful Grave” indeed defies the ethnolinguistic unity of national literature laid out as “written in Korean language, by Korean writers, for Korean readers” in the virtual forum mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Although penned in Korean, the story does not target readers in overseas Korean communities. No Korean fictional characters appear in the story. The author does not try to show his fellow Korean immigrants, for example, how to cope with racial discrimination in the United States or how they might assimilate into the mainstream society without completely losing their ethnic identities. Instead, he invites the readers to see the issue of racial disparity not as a Korean problem but as a question affecting all walks of life in the United States and around the world. He addresses the story to a white majority as well as racial minorities, holding both parties accountable for building a racially harmonious future.

Thun’s “A Pitiful Grave” thus inspires us to re-examine modern Korean literature outside the myth of authenticity—the belief that Korean literature should represent an authentic Korean experience and serve as a voice for the Korean reading public. I am tempted to say that Thun’s idiosyncratic path as an amateur diasporic writer helped him gain a distinctively transnational perspective: while spending most of his life as a low-wage immigrant worker with a limited command of English, he nonetheless continuously educated himself outside the modern school system and found literary inspiration in a medley of sources available to him, such as Hollywood cinema, Korean American newspapers, and various printed materials imported from Korea—including early colonial Korean novels and possibly some Korean editions of premodern Chinese literary works. The Nak Chung Thun Archive demands that researchers look beyond national borders and examine how diverse cultural and literary practices on both sides of the Pacific Ocean come together to open up new possibilities for literary studies. It is my hope that further explorations of this archive will lead us down the path to other transpacific archives.
Notes

Here I thank Sunyoung Park for calling my attention to Nak Chung Thun’s works and Kenneth Klein, the head of the USC East Asia Library, for allowing me to access Thun’s archive. While reading two handwritten manuscripts of the story, I referred to a draft of “Karyŏnjok punnyo” partially modernized and typed by Yi Jiyoung (Ch’ungbuk University). I am grateful to Jiyoung Yi for sharing her draft with me. My reading of Thun’s other stories was helped by Hwang Jae Moon’s modernized versions. I also acknowledge that I was inspired to write this essay in part by Nayoung Aimee Kwon’s discussion of the significance of excavating transnational archives in literary studies in an earlier version of her chapter in this volume. The first draft of this chapter was presented at the Association for Asian Studies annual conference, Denver, on March 2019. I also thank the panel discussant, Steven Lee, for his helpful feedback.

1 “‘Chosŏn munhak’ ŭi chŏngŭi,” 82.
3 “‘Chosŏn munhak’ ŭi chŏngŭi,” 82.
4 Koh, Infected Korean Language.
5 Perry, “Korean as Proletarian.”
6 The exact year of Nak Chung Thun’s birth has yet to be verified. There is a slight inconsistency among the federal records about him. The List or Manifest of Alien Passengers for the US Immigration Officer at Port of Arrival, for example, indicates that he was twenty-four years old on the day he arrived in Honolulu on March 4, 1904 (which suggests he was born sometime between 1879 and 1880). The Fourteenth Census of the United States recorded in January 1920 indicates that Thun was forty-two years old, implying that he was born between 1877 and 1878. One of the private records formerly in the possession of his daughter, Ellen Thun, has a handwritten record that says “Dunn Nak Chung, date of birth 24 December 1876.” Nak Chung Thun’s family did not standardize the romanization of their last name (Ch’ŏn according the McCune-Reischauer system), for a while after their immigration, using Chun, Dunn, or Thun inconsistently; he and his children eventually settled on Thun and his brother’s family on Dunn.
8 To name a few, Tonghae Subu, “Miinsin: Miin ŭi ma’um” and “Tyŏlhyŏl wŏnang.”
9 To this list one, we can add contemporary examples, such as Ch’ŏn Myŏng’ghan’s “Tŏ môtch’in insaeng ŭi wihae—Mati ege (For a more fabulous life—To Marti) (2005) and “Yukw’ae’han hanyŏ Marisa (A cheerful housemaid, Marisa)” (2006), “P’urang’ŭ hyŏkmyŏngsa—Chein Welsi ŭi kanjŏla put’ak (A history of the French Revolution—Jane Welsh’s sincere request)” (2007). See also O Hyejin, Chi’gŭkki munhakjŏkin, 55–79.
10 Kur’um’s “Tolmŏngnŭn saramdŭl,” for example, is set on the Korean Peninsula and portrays no diasporic characters.
11 Hoskins and Nguyen, Transpacific Studies, 24.
13 They later found their brides in their native countries through the transpacific exchange of letters and photographs on the picture bride system; see Patterson, The Ise, 80–99.
14 For the genealogy of the Chun/Dunn/Thun family, I rely on USC librarian Kenneth Klein’s unpublished notes.
16 Jacob Thun, 88. “Thun Nak Chung ssi puin ŭi ipwŏn” (Mr. Thun Nak Chung’s wife hospitalized), Sinhan minbo, October 11, 1919.
18 One of the few exceptions would be the proletarian writer Ch’oe Sŏhae (1901–1932). Born into a poverty-stricken tenant family, he spent his childhood and adolescent years toiling in the northeastern province of Korea and in Manchuria until debuting as a writer in 1924. Cf. Park and Gatrall, On the Eve of the Uprising, 113–14.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
Ibid., 2.

24 Kongnip sinbo, September 7, 1906; an adult Korean male plantation worker received eighteen dollars a month. Patterson, The Ise, 17.

25 Kongnip sinbo, October 18, 1907. Also see Edward Chang, P’ach’ap’a k’ae p’u.

26 Kongnip sinbo, June 21, 1907.

27 Jacob Dunn describes the impact of Sinhan minbo on Korean immigrants in Riverside as follows: “They were people lively to news. They read with avid interest the Sinhan Minbo a weekly published in native script, maintained by their yearly subscriptions.” Dunn, “The Quest in Exile,” 53.

28 Sinhan minbo, August 15, 1913.


30 Yi Jiyoung, A Subversive Nostalgia, 1. Thun’s full-length novels are Hong Kyôngnae chôn [The Story of Hong Kyôngnae], Hong Chungnae chôn [The Story of Hong Chungnae], and Budo.


32 The archive also includes different versions of the same pieces. They are handwritten on yellow legal notepads, in vertical columns from top to bottom and from right to left—the way traditional East Asian texts are typically written.

33 Kang, The Grass Roof; Kang, East Goes West.

34 Yang, From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men.

35 Kim, Asian American Literature, 24.

36 Yang, From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men, 4.

37 Ibid., 7.

38 On the use of the verb ending in tŏra in Korean fiction, see Kwŏn Podŭrae, Han’guk kŭndae sosŏl, 236–9.


40 Nak Chung Thun’s reworking of the early colonial domestic novel wouldn’t have been possible if Korean books had not been circulated in overseas Korean communities. Thun could not have read examples of the early colonial domestic novel before his emigration, because the first of its kind, Tears of Blood, was serialized in 1906, two years after Thun left for the United States. However, it is likely that Thun had access to this genre. At least from 1909, a number of early colonial novels were available in Southern California, along with a variety of books, journals, and dictionaries from Korea: bookstores such as Sonyŏn sŏhoe (Boys’ Book Club) and T’aebaek sŏ’gwan (T’aebaek Bookstore) regularly listed their inventory in Sinhan minbo, to which Thun both subscribed and contributed. See Sinhan minbo, August 11, 1909. The last book advertisement of Sonyŏn sŏhoe appeared on November 21, 1918. T’aebaek sŏ’gwan published its inventory the following week. Cf. Sinhan minbo, November 21, 1918, and November 28, 1918. See also Kim Yŏngran, “Miju ch’ogi imin ŭi ch’ulp’an.” Thun’s use of this genre might have been mediated by other works of early Korean American literature that emulated the style of the early colonial novel. Cf. Song Myŏngjin, “Chirijŏk kyŏnggye ŭi ilt’al.”


42 Ibid.

43 Ibid., 6.

44 Ibid, 4.


46 Ibid., 14.

47 Ibid., 16.

48 Ibid., 18.

49 Ofler, “Herbert Spencer.”

50 On the roles of the Roman Catholic and Methodist churches in controlling interracial marriages in Singapore and Malaya in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see March Rerceretnam, “Intermarriage in Intermarriage in colonial Malaya and Singapore.”

51 Thun, “Karyŏnjŏk Pumnyŏ,” 32.

52 US anti-miscegenation laws were never enforced consistently but were on the books in a number of states until the US Supreme Court ruled them as unconstitutional in Loving v. Virginia in 1967. Eunhye Kwon argues that the discourse of anti-interracial intimacy in the American West focused on marriages between Chinese/Japanese men and white women. Kwon, “Interracial Marriages Among Asian Americans in the U.S. West.”


54 Ibid. See also Sakamoto, “The Cult of ‘Love and Eugenics’ in May Fourth.”

55 I am grateful to Hye Seung Chung for the reference to The Bitter Tea of General Yen.
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56 S安东拉, “East Is East and West Is West?” 68.
57 杨, From Domestic Women to Sensitive Young Men, 7.
58 氏鸿GitHub, “Kyemong kwa honghyŏl,” 338–52.

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