

Coming out of the Ethnic Closet: Perspectives on Identity

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In the context of identity politics, identity has been perceived as something substantial, inborn and essential—an unchangeable quality of self that waits to be explored and expressed. Its dynamic aspect could be nurtured through enlightenment and experience as one grows up. Although multiplicity of identity has always been an issue, especially when those who are in the margin of the society were discussed, it was perceived as plausible and existential; something already there, and if you are honest, courageous, and articulate enough, you can take it out and share it with the rest of the world.

However, as identity changes over time and space, so does its definition and meaning. After the Linguistic Turn (see Rorty, 1992), which emphasizes the power of language that shapes and produces our thought, language is no longer seen as a tool to express the thoughts already in our mind but rather perceived as a system to shape and produce them. Ueno (2001) argues that the paradigm shift after the Linguistic Turn brought an epistemological questioning of the “objective fact,” instigating “simultaneous, multiple plate shift in knowledge” across the fields of social science (p. 277). This important change was also brought to the field of narrative analysis.

Narratives, including identity narratives, can no longer be taken as an output of a substantial self but rather as a constructive and negotiating process between a speaker and an audience. The focus was shifted from what was said to what can be said in a given discourse community. For example, developing Foucault’s (1978) argument that human beings become subjects by being subject to the discourse, Fairclough’s (2001) critical narrative analysis emphasizes the interdependency between an individual’s narrative and the discourse that surrounds it. He questions the notion of “spontaneous talk” that is independent from the shared knowledge and expectations, and emphasizes the interdependent nature

between discourse and narrative construction.

From this point of view, I will perceive identity narratives not so much as a confession of the past or “true self,” but rather as a future-oriented decision and a commitment; how one wants or choose to present self in his/her discourse community. Identity narrative describes not only who you were and who you are, but also who you will be in a particular discourse community that you belong to. Attention should also be paid to the act of identity narrative itself; why does this person decide to talk about identity out loud? What is the purpose and desire?

As the argument revolving around the “don’t ask, don’t tell policy” suggests, there is a huge gap between silently sharing one’s secret with others and articulating it out loud. For example, there are many ethnic Koreans in Japan who use Japanese pass names on a daily basis, hiding their ethnicity. However, the reality is that often people around them already know or assume their ethnic background; it is just a shared secret on both sides. As long as ethnic Koreans use Japanese pass names, both sides can pretend not to notice and play the game nonchalantly. The custom of using Japanese pass names contributes not so much to concealing their ethnic background, but to maintaining this shared secret policy: even if everyone knows, everyone can pretend not to notice.

On the other hand, adoption of a Korean name, which does not allow such a pretension, surely will bring discord to such “harmony.” In that sense, Korean names should not be recognized simply as revealing one’s ethnic background, but more as the presentation of one’s positioning and commitment to the world. For those who decide to speak out, identity narratives mean the beginning of a new relationship with others and the world.

However, they soon notice that presentation of identity is not exclusively the property of self; once outside, such open statements go beyond one’s

intention. If you are a Jew, so is your family. Your confession may reveal what your kin do not want to share with the rest of the world. Because of the blood relationship, your commitment demands your family members, who are in a default setting basking in a shared secret policy, to face and deal with the issues despite their will or wish.

In this essay, I want to explore the dilemma that identity as a commitment holds by introducing a story I heard from my close friend who decided to adopt a Korean name after she entered college. I want to tell the story of the conflict between one's choice and the way family members choose to live. Here is her story:

About a year ago, my brother's former colleague opened a new clinic in my neighborhood. I went there last month to get a medical check-up to submit to the company. While seeing a doctor, I was wondering whether I should mention my brother to him or not. Why? It is because of my Korean name that presents my ethnic background. I started to use Korean name after I entered a college, a big commitment to live as a visible minority. It is difficult for the people in Japan to tell my Korean ethnicity from appearance alone, but my Korean name always made me a visible "Other." As I submitted my health insurance card with my Korean name on it, I was wondering whether I should tell the doctor my relationship with my brother or not. Since all my family use Japanese pass names, including my brother, I was quite sure the doctor did not know my brother's ethnic background. But if I say we are siblings, he would easily assume my brother is an ethnic Korean, too. My brother is not one of those who makes every effort to hide Korean ethnicity. Yet I thought he might feel uncomfortable if his ethnic background were suddenly revealed. This is a familiar conflict I face when I meet the common acquaintances of my family, and I thought it would be safer to remain silent as usual.

However, when the doctor asked me, "how did you find out about my clinic?" I told him about my brother and our relationship. The doctor showed unexpected happy surprise and asked me to say kind regards to my brother. I was relieved by the doctor's reaction and thought that it was not a big deal after all and

I shouldn't be too nervous telling who I am to my family's acquaintances.

Then about a week later, there was a family gathering celebrating my father's birthday. My brother's and sisters' families got together. When the topic came to the clinic near our house, I told my brother that I went there just a week ago to get a medical check-up. Then my brother said, "Oh, really? And did you tell him that you were my sister?" I felt the tension that filled the atmosphere. It was a question that everyone there wanted to hear the answer to. Everyone wanted to know whether I revealed my brother's ethnic background by telling the doctor that I was his sister. As soon as I answered "yes," my mother got upset. "How could you? Why did you say such an unnecessary thing!" My brother quickly calmed her down by saying "It's O.K. I don't care (about my ethnic background being revealed)." But my sisters were also critical of me, and that night when I was alone with my parents they told me that I should have known better; that I should be more careful and thoughtful about my brother and his family.

I was upset and angry with my parents. I thought they should respect my feelings too as much as they worry about my brother's. I hated their hypocrisy; encouraging me and actually being proud of my using my Korean name when they were with other ethnic Koreans but hating it when I use my Korean name in front of their Japanese acquaintances. It seems so ridiculous for us ethnic Koreans to live between two names like a swinging pendulum.

But then, I gave it a second thought and felt that it was unfair of me to expose my brother's secret in that manner. What if I were in his position? I mean it would be quite contrary but what if my friends who know me only by my Korean name suddenly notice that I used to use a Japanese pass name? I would surely be embarrassed. I discarded the Japanese pass name as I entered college because I wanted to get away from my guilty feeling that I was deceiving myself and others. I was not so much ashamed of being Korean but was very much bothered by the idea that I was cowardly hiding something. I wanted to be myself in front of other people; a consistent

person with one name. My desire to maintain a consistent self-image always made me afraid that my friend might find out my Korean name while I was using a Japanese pass name. By the same token, after I started using my Korean name, I was afraid my ex-Japanese name might be revealed to my college friends; a serious threat to my consistent self-image.

People with one name usually see no distinction between Koreans who grew up in Korea with only a Korean name and ethnic Koreans like me who chose to use a Korean name in Japan. But I think there is a huge difference between us; I feel my identity fits neither with my Korean name, nor my Japanese name. It is not so much like I belong to both names positively, but rather I belong to neither of them. It is as if I am the “negative” of the two; that is to say, I exist as “not Japanese” yet simultaneously “not Korean.”

Sometimes people commend me for my using Korean name, saying I am courageous and strong. But I do not think that is true. I have to admit that I share and understand the contradictory feelings my parents have toward our ethnicity with complicated and dynamic emotions. That is why I got hurt and angry with my parents: I saw myself in them, the same dilemma and hypocrisy, the need to be consistent.

This story of my close friend remained in my heart so vividly for a long time. It was so poignant to me as I shared the very similar emotional conflict since I started to use my Korean name. It could be a story of my own as well as other *zainichi* who chose to live as a marked “Other” in a Japanese society. The shared dilemma is that “one’s confession” necessitates the unexpected involvement of his/her family. Whether we like it or not, families stand on an extended line of our identity. Although it is their affection and caring that nurture and embrace us, it is also their excessive affection and attachment that hurt and distract our commitment to our identity.

As much as they support and protect us from society, they get in our way and interfere with our challenge against it in the name of love and caring. It would be easy to criticize the attitudes of the parents of my friend. However, what we should ponder here is

the fact that their comments only reflect the value system and “reality” we see in our society. We should not forget that my friend, who appears to be against such values, also belongs to the same discourse community and shares the “reality.” Even if she knows that what makes her suffer is just something imagined, she still cannot get away from it.

As Žižek puts it, ideology is no longer something we do without realizing it, but rather something we do even though we know it. We know the price of the brand item is not so much to do with the substantial value, but with the illusion the brand sign produces in our “value system.” However, the problem is that, though we understand the mechanism of the market, the brand item does appear to have the substantial value even if we rationally know it does not. It might sound strange but our illusion is real in that sense, and whether we conform to it or try go against it, it always stays with us as a referential point. I do not have any answer to the conflict between my friend’s logical commitment and the powerful illusion that distracts it. However, to try to accept such a contradiction might be the first step to get along with oneself. Maybe identity commitment is not hope for an impeccable honest self, but a way of getting along with endless irrational and contradictory feelings within; a commitment to live the complication. Why? Because identity preconditions such contradiction and if we try to “solve” the problem of contradiction, we might lose the narrative of identity itself.

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