

Translational Futures:  
Asian/ American Environmental Fiction and the Transpacific Turn

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## Curriculum Vitae

Claire Gullander-Drolet was born in Montreal, Québec, where she earned a B.A in English from Concordia University in 2010. Following the completion of her M.A (Trent University, 2011), she taught English at Pusan National University of English in Pusan, South Korea. Since coming to Brown in 2013, she has written and published on a variety of topics related to translation and the environment in a transpacific frame: a work on translational form and empathic reading in Ruth Ozeki was recently published in *The Journal of Transnational American Studies* (9.1, 2018), and another, on Bong Joon-ho's bilingual climate-change blockbuster *Snowpiercer*, is forthcoming in *Resilience: a Journal of the Environmental Humanities* (Winter 2019). She has also written on Korean literature in an international context; an essay on the metaphor of flooding in Kim Ae-ran's short fiction won the best essay award from the *Asia Literary Review* in 2018. Most recently, she completed a year in Seoul as Korea Foundation Language Training Fellow.

## Acknowledgements

In the months leading up to submitting this project—the culmination, it feels like, of much more than the six years I spent here at Brown—I found myself inexplicably returning to a genre that obsessed me in my younger years: the zombie show. That I drew comfort from such a spectacularly violent genre troubled me, at first, though this gnawing realization did little to deter my viewing; I continued watching, scene after scene of gore beyond imagine, insatiable. I reasoned that the catastrophic scenarios laid out in my favorite zombie programs were an escape from my studies, from the theory and literature I spent my days with. But this rationale never fully satisfied either: for reasons that were for a long time unclear to me, the suggestion of an elision between my entertainment of choice (zombies) and my intellectual life, both at Brown and in the world, kept cropping up, again and again.

To the zombie novice this might seem a bleak analogy, but it is, I think, exactly the opposite. For the zombie genre pivots on hope: it is hope that propels the survivors of an apocalyptic event forward; in its absence, the narrative atrophies, and neither survivor nor viewer can continue on. Graduate school—and writing a dissertation in particular—is, as with surviving a zombie apocalypse, a long and protracted process. Difficult (and gory) at times, but, more often than not, the site of unexpected, rewarding, and even life-giving encounters. I am so very grateful to all of those who have inspired and helped me along the way, renewing my hope in this work and in the essential goodness of humanity when I needed it most.

I want to begin by thanking my dissertation committee. My mentor, Daniel Kim, has been a constant source of support and guidance since I arrived at Brown, and his thoughtful feedback on my work (and conviction in its value) has been sustaining to me

during my time here. I owe him a debt of gratitude. Sam Perry eagerly took me on as a mentee despite my lack of formal training in East Asian studies, and his encouragement to continue to study and research in Korea (and East Asia more widely) has been invaluable. Ada Smailbegović and Ralph Rodriguez were later additions to my committee, and their insightful comments on my work have been extraordinarily generative. I thank them both sincerely.

I have been fortunate to research and work with so many brilliant, kind, and quirky thinkers in the English department at Brown, many of whom have become good friends. Thank you especially to Anna Thomas, Jerrine Tan, Jennie Snow, Dashiell Wasserman, Dorin Smith, Michelle Rada, John Casey, and Cole Morgan. To the amazing people who run the department—Lorraine Mazza, Ellen Viola, Marilyn Netter—thank you for your tireless work on behalf of the graduate students and faculty, and for making 70 Brown street a warm and inviting place to do research and work.

In writing this dissertation, I was buoyed by encouragement and support from friends and family around the world. Though far away, Sarah Bernstein, Marianne Brownie, Lysa-Marie Mapile, Tranna Wintour, Hyung-hoo Kim, and Ju-hee Han have all been incredibly supportive, and I am grateful for their friendship. I thank my Ashtanga teachers Bristol Maryott and Hwasun Lee; you taught me to be soft and hard, respectively, and these are lessons I continue to draw on in my work and in my life. I thank my yoga satsangs in Providence and Seoul, as well as Aleta Johnson for showing me the importance of self-kindness. My partner Mu-seong Jeong's patience and enthusiasm for my work over the past six years continues to humble me: it has been a trying road at times, between three countries and countless kilometers of air travel, but he has never wavered in his encouragement. I thank him, and his family, for their love and support.

I was fortunate during my time at Brown to meet the woman who would become my best friend (and roommate), Suzanne Enzerink. It is not an understatement to say that her friendship has been life-giving, and that without her, I would not have made it through this process. I thank her for her batty sense of humor, for modeling confidence and drive, for a lifetime of amazing experiences. Most of all, I thank her for believing in me and pushing me forward at times when I thought I could not continue. In Suzanne I found kindred spirit, and I am both infinitely grateful and forever in her debt.

In closing, I thank my family—my father, Paul Drolet, who always encouraged my reading (and strange interests); my sister Louise, for her big and giving heart and love of learning, and my soon-to-be brother in law Fraser, whose kindness and zest for life are, to use another zombie-ism, infectious. Last but certainly not least, I thank my mother, Karla Gullander. My mother is an enthusiastic and curious reader, and she taught me to love books from a young age. She is also the hardest worker I know and humbles me with her resilience and strength. This dissertation is for her.

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## Introduction: Transpacific Entanglements

When South Korean novelist Han Kang won the Man Booker prize for her novel *The Vegetarian* (채식주의자 / *Ch'aeshikchuiija*) in 2016, it was a watershed moment on multiple fronts.<sup>1</sup> The granting of such a prestigious international award to a South Korean writer seemed to validate, on the one hand, recent efforts by the South Korean government aimed at promoting Korean literature and garnering literary prestige abroad.<sup>2</sup> The Man Booker's decision to honor the novel's English translator, Deborah Smith, was likewise significant, signaling to many a long-overdue recognition of translation work as a distinct, and equally valuable, form of literary production.<sup>3</sup> The monetary politics of the award reflected this division of labor, with Kang and Smith splitting the prize money—a cool 100,000 GBP—neatly down the middle, as though to symbolize the equal weight of their artistic contributions.

At the time of her Man Booker win, Kang was already a towering figure in the South Korean literary scene, a decorated writer who received the prestigious Yi Sang literary award in 2005. Known for her stark, spare prose style and preoccupation with the darker elements of humanity, she often writes about violence, madness, and grief as animating concerns in Korean social and political life. *The Vegetarian* relocates these concerns to the realm of the domestic, exploring—in gruesome detail—the social and

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<sup>1</sup> All Korean names and titles and romanized using the McCune-Reischauer system. Translations from the Korean, unless otherwise specified, are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Mythili G. Rao, "Can a Big Government Push Bring the Nobel Prize in Literature to South Korea?," *The New Yorker*, January 28, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/can-a-big-government-push-bring-the-nobel-prize-in-literature-to-south-korea>.

<sup>3</sup> Since the Man Booker reconfigured its award to recognize translated works (and translators), other major international literary prizes have followed suit, including (most recently) the National Book Award. See Alexandra Alter, "The Globalization of the National Book Awards," *The New York Times*, January 31<sup>st</sup>, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/31/books/the-globalization-of-the-national-book-awards.html>.

psychological fallout that results from a housewife's decision to stop eating meat. Smith, by contrast, was a virtual unknown, a twenty-eight-year old graduate student at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London who had begun learning Korean only six years prior. But while Smith's lack of translation experience and familiarity with the language did little to sour anglophone receptions of the text—the Man Booker award judges, on the contrary, praised her “perfectly judged translation,” which they claimed matched Kang's “uncanny blend of beauty and horror at every turn”—its reception in South Korea was less laudatory.<sup>4</sup> The initial elation at Kang's victory was quickly supplanted by outrage as bilingual readers began to uncover what appeared to be more and more grievous inconsistencies in her translation. These errors ranged from the less consequential—confusing the names of common nouns or places—to far more serious, as in sentences where the speaker or object of the sentence are misidentified or omitted altogether. News media articles chronicling these errors, as well as academic essays that weighing the implications of the translation, proliferated in the weeks following the Man Booker win.

The most egregious charges levied against Smith stem not from what she left out of her translation, but from what she put in: according to research presented at Ewha Women's University in Seoul in 2017, nearly a third of the descriptive prose in Smith's version—31.5%—has no correlative in the original.<sup>5</sup> The result of such liberal translation work is a drastic shift in the tone and style of Kang's prose, one which even Smith apologists are wont to point out. In his overview of the translation controversy

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<sup>4</sup> “The Vegetarian Wins Man Booker International Prize 2016,” *The Man Booker Prize* website, <https://themanbookerprize.com/resources/media/pressreleases/vegetarian-wins-man-booker-international-prize-2016>.

<sup>5</sup> Charse Yun, “You Say Melon, I Say Lemon: Deborah Smith's Flawed Yet Remarkable Translation of ‘The Vegetarian,’” *Korea Expose*, July 2, 2017, <https://www.koreaexpose.com/deborah-smith-translation-han-kang-novel-vegetarian/>.

surrounding *The Vegetarian*, Seoul-based professor and translator Charse Yun describes this stylistic dissonance between Kang and Smith as a case of literary apples and oranges (or lemons and melons, to use his formulation). He writes:

I can't emphasize enough how different Han Kang's writing style is in Korean. Han's sentences are spare and quiet, sometimes ending in fragments. In contrast, Smith uses a high, formal style with lyrical flourishes ... the translation has a nineteenth-century ring to it, reminiscent of Chekhov. The example is extreme, but imagine the spare style of Raymond Carver being translated so that it sounds like Charles Dickens.<sup>6</sup>

But while Yun's review is generally sympathetic to Smith's translation—he praises her for, among other things, her “talent in English,” and for “introduc[ing] a work of literature to people who might otherwise never have a chance to read it”—other critics were far more skeptical. As literary critic and professor Cho Jae-ryo sarcastically put it: “if the translation has changed the original this much, can the glory [of the Man Booker prize] really be attributed to Korean literature at all?”<sup>7</sup>

As a kind of sociological example, *The Vegetarian* controversy offers a useful roadmap for the signal concerns of this project, which revolve around literary translation's intersections with forms of violent erasure. It underscores, firstly, the peculiar invisibility of translation work in our current historical moment. Though we are living in a time where, per Rebecca Walkowitz, “there is nothing easier and nothing more contemporary than translation,”<sup>8</sup> the rise of translated fiction in English has done little to foster a culture where the political leanings of translations into English are questioned or critiqued.<sup>9</sup> It also suggests that this translational invisibility both resembles—and is, at

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<sup>6</sup> Yun, “You Say Melon.”

<sup>7</sup> Shin Jun-bong, “ch'aeshikchuŭijat'em kotkot öngttunghan pönyök ... sŭmisŭ, chuösaengnyak ihae mot'ae” [In *The Vegetarian*, mistranslations abound ... Smith doesn't understand dropped subjects]. *Chungang ilbo*, March 6, 2017, <https://news.joins.com/article/21339866>

<sup>8</sup> Walkowitz, Rebecca. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Venuti's book *The Translator's Invisibility: a History of Translation* (Routledge, 1995) is one of the earliest and most influential translation studies texts to problematize the erasure of translation work in a historical frame. Variations on this argument can be found in East Asian studies (Eric Hayot, “The Asian

times, problematically complicit with—other kinds of persistent invisibilities, as with the violence visited against women and animals in Kang’s novel. Smith’s observation that the “overwhelming focus on *The Vegetarian’s* [translational] aesthetics is a way of avoiding talking about its politics”—an apt statement that nevertheless manages to avoid taking responsibility for the potentially violent elisions her translation has been accused of—is reflective of this kind of ambivalence.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than take these contradictions as justification for an embrace of a negative “untranslatability” politics, this project seeks to 1) uncover the generative possibilities that inhere in translation’s invisible / invisibilizing properties, and 2) makes a case for their import in a global moment where violence against marginalized communities, particularly of the environmental variety, is at once omnipresent and difficult to see.<sup>11</sup> To this end, it identifies an emergent genre of Asian/American literature and film that mobilizes interlingual translation as a heuristic for representing environmental disaster, as well as for the limits of transnationalism in an era of extreme planetary transformation. Though the particular forms of disaster surveyed in this book vary wildly in scope and scale—from planetary crises like global warming to instances of violence visited against the individual human / plant / animal body—they all take as their starting point environmental violence’s seeming resistance to artistic representation. Drawing attention to this resistance through moments of translational rupture, mistranslation, or deferral, the authors and filmmakers surveyed here all mark reading *for translation* as an important

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Turns”), film studies (Abe Mark Nornes, *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema*), and postcolonial literary criticism (Spivak, “Translating into English,” *Translation as Culture*”).

<sup>10</sup> Smith, Deborah. “What We Talk About When We Talk About Translation.” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, January 11, 2018, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/what-we-talk-about-when-we-talk-about-translation/>

<sup>11</sup> I explore this peculiar elision between untranslatability and negativity in greater detail in chapter two, on Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*.

rhetorical praxis in our current historical moment, one that can recuperate marginalized histories and dilate space for imagining alternative political and environmental futures.

In its attention to the complex power dynamics inherent in translation and its erasure, then, this project addresses two distinct yet interrelated problematics of visibility operating within transnational American studies and the environmental humanities. The first concerns the orientation, both geographic and linguistic, of the so-called “transnational turn.” While many twentieth-century Americanists have lauded environmental literature—and its negotiation between global and local politics—for moving theory beyond the confines of the continental United States, this turn has been undermined by a persistent anglo-and-eurocentrism.<sup>12</sup> The second problematic concerns the representational slipperiness of environmental disasters themselves, particularly in artistic works that move across or straddle multiple linguistic and cultural contexts. While anthologies of climate-change literature from non-US contexts have proliferated in the past ten years, there has to date been little attempt to think through the ways in which interlingual translation—in its necessarily partial and ideologically-inflected forms—might shape knowledge production about the Anthropocene.<sup>13</sup> As a result, transnational scholarship on environmental literature, even when critical of US environmental policies, reflexively endorses this anglo-and-US-centric agenda.

Without an adequate analysis of how translation work shapes textual depictions of the environment, climate change and its attendant crises remain the purview of the anglophone US, written in English and for an English-speaking audience. *Translational*

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<sup>12</sup> Ursula Heise’s 2008 article, “Ecocriticism and the Transnational Turn in American Studies,” (*Literary History*, 20 no. 1 (2008): 381-404) is perhaps the most representative example of the dynamic I’m describing here.

<sup>13</sup> I take my definition of interlingual translation from Roman Jakobson: “interlingual translation, or *translation proper*, is an interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language.” In Brower, Ruben A. ed. *On Translation*. In *On Translation*, ed. Ruben A. Brower, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 233

*Futures* remedies this gap by rerouting the field of focus to a multilingual archive of works by four diasporic Asian authors—Bong Joon-ho, Ruth Ozeki, Karen Tei Yamashita, and Han Kang—all of whom invoke histories of American imperialism and expansionism in their global environmental critiques but refuse to center the US geographically or linguistically. In the following section, I move to situate this project within my three primary fields of inquiry—transpacific literary studies, ecocriticism, and translation studies—while outlining my intervention in the critical debates outlined above.

### (American) Transnationalism, Ecocriticism, and the Transpacific Turn

Though scholars working in the field of American literature and cultural studies have been employing transnational frameworks and methodologies since at least the early 1990s, the theoretical contours of transnational American studies as a field of study remain a persistent topic of debate.<sup>14</sup> At times, the decentering impulses that would appear to be one of transnationalism's greatest strengths—its implicit desire to move beyond models of the (American) nation state, for example—also appear as its greatest weaknesses, as the sheer scope of its geographical, cultural, and historical frames render it an often unwieldy, if not fatally biased, critical praxis. Yogita Goyal acknowledges this double-bind in her recent introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*: on the one hand, transnational approaches “[can] unsettle nationalist myths of cultural purity, reveal through comparison the interconnectedness of various

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<sup>14</sup> In addition to *The Cambridge Companion*, major volumes that take up the category of the transnational in relation to American literature and American studies from the last decade include Paul Jay's *Global Matters: the Transnational Turn In Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010); *The Imaginary and Its Worlds : American Studies After the Transnational Turn*. (Eds. Bieger, Laura, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz; Hanover, NH: Dartmouth UP, 2013); and, pertinently for this study especially, Yuan Shu and Donald E Pease's *American Studies As Transnational Practice: Turning Toward the Transpacific* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth UP, 2015).

parts of the world and peoples, and offer an analysis of past and present imperialisms,” and that, by “no longer viewing literature as the expression of a national essence, transnational approaches radically reformulate the basic object and scope of literary analysis in and about the United States.”<sup>15</sup> At the same time, she notes, such an expansive field of focus often runs the risk of homogenizing cultural, social, and linguistic contexts, “elid[ing] historical differences and local specificity in the name of easy comparisons and a promotion of hybridity.”<sup>16</sup>

This threat of eliding difference(s) or collapsing into homogeneity is particularly keenly felt in Asian American studies, where Lisa Lowe’s canonical call for a criticism attentive to “heterogeneity, hybridity, and multiplicity” still reverberates even as the field continues to expand and encompass ever more complex and contested identities, nations, and historical contexts.<sup>17</sup> Increasingly, scholars working at the nexus of Asian/ American studies and the transnational have responded to this need to engage with divergent national and cultural perspectives by calling for a turn to the transpacific as a critical site for the historical encounters—martial, ideological, literary, cultural—between the US (or the Americas) and Asia(s).<sup>18</sup> The difference between a transpacific approach to Asian/ American literary or cultural productions and a transnational one, then, arguably lies in its insistence on giving commensurate weight to the national players involved.

Transpacific criticism, per Viet Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, ought to proceed

from the premise that both sides of the Pacific must be taken into account, as well as the populations, subjectivities, and histories of the ocean in between, transpacific studies acknowledges the importance of American power but stresses the necessity of

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<sup>15</sup> Yogita Goyal, “Introduction: The Transnational Turn,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Transnational American Literature*, ed. Yogita Goyal (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 8  
Goyal 8

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics* (Durham: Duke UP: 1996), 34

<sup>18</sup> In this sense, transpacific studies as an emergent field is indebted to an older tradition of transatlantic—and, in particular, Black Atlantic—criticism, with Paul Gilroy’s seminal *Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993) often cited as an influence.

foregrounding Asia and the Pacific. Hopefully by doing so, transpacific studies can avoid being another imperializing gesture from the west, wherein an oppositional method also reasserts the dominant subjectivity of western practitioners.<sup>19</sup>

One of transpacific studies' signal interventions, then, lies in its interlingual sensibilities. It is telling that one of the first scholarly works to advance the idea of a transpacific approach to literary criticism, Yunte Huang's *Transpacific Displacement: Ethnography, Translation, and Intertextual Travel in Twentieth-Century American Literature* (2002), looks specifically to the translational encounters between the U.S and China as significant (and significantly overlooked) site(s) of knowledge production.<sup>20</sup> In Huang's framing, the Pacific is "a contact zone between competing geopolitical ambitions and a gap between literature and history that is riddled with distortions, half-truths, longings, and affective burdens never fully resolved in the unevenly temporalized space of the transpacific."<sup>21</sup> ( By reading this space for articulations of translation—which exemplify the kind of aesthetic strategy of self-preservation Huang calls "counterpoetics"—alternate narratives, both literary and historical, emerge.<sup>22</sup>

Following Huang's method of reading for the gap between literature and history, *Translational Futures* suggests that the Pacific functions as a repository for another kind of narrative between the U.S and Asia, one that is distinctly environmental. From the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki during World War II, the nuclear disaster at Fukushima, and the "Great Pacific Garbage Patch"—a swirling gyre of trash in the Pacific

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<sup>19</sup> Viet Thanh Nguyen and Janet Hoskins, *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emerging Field* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2014), 24

<sup>20</sup> The space Huang is theorizing here is distinct from the concept of the "Pacific Rim," a border or boundary space that has a slightly longer theoretical tradition; Rob Wilson and Arif Dirlik's edited volume *Asia/Pacific As A Space of Cultural Production* (Durham: Duke UP, 1995) and David Palumbo-Liu's *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier* (Stanford UP: 1999) are representative examples here.

<sup>21</sup> Huang, Yunte. *Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2

<sup>22</sup> For more on Huang's conception of historical counterpoetics, see my Ozeki chapter.

Ocean roughly the size of Texas—the histories of the transpacific are not limited to human conflict, but encompass violent encounters between nonhuman animals, material objects, and ecosystems as well. Here, I argue that interlingual translation has the capacity to depict environmental slow violence more effectively than other modes of writing because it is, at core, an “impure” narrative form. Though translating across languages always involves an act of approximation — a striving to produce an “echo of the original,” as Walter Benjamin famously put it—we tend to assume, particularly in matters of global concern like climate change, an even exchange of information.<sup>23</sup> And because Asian racialization in the west is so often tied to language and the imperative to speak English, there is, as Christopher Lee has suggested, often a logic of translation always-already at work in Asian/American literature—if not explicitly in the form of interlingual translation, through acts of cultural translation that entail “negotiat[ing the] expectations and demands” of multiple cultures.<sup>24</sup> The Asian/American authors I examine in this project all endeavour to deflate the idea of a “perfect” translation by emphasizing moments of translational failure, mistranslation, or delay. In so doing, they give visual expression to the spectral histories of racialized, gendered, and environmental slow violence that authoritative translations or accounts of history elide.

Reading environmental disaster violence through the lens of translation, especially in such a way that privileges Asian or transpacific perspectives, has two important implications for the broader study of environmental literature. It works, firstly, to fill a gap in climate change scholarship in English, where Asia is largely invisibilized despite its voluminous population and agential role within the global petrocapi-

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<sup>23</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, eds. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 258

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Lee, “The Writing of Translation,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian American Literature*, eds. Crystal Parikh and Daniel Kim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 130

economy.<sup>25</sup> It also works to frame climate change as a distinctly linguistic problem as well as an environmental one. How, for example, do we begin to conceptualize ecological ruin on a global scale without an attention to language and language difference(s)? And how do we think about translation's function within this representational schematic? While translation theorists and linguists have begun to work through these issues—most notably within the burgeoning field of ecolinguistics—I emphasize Asian/American environmental fiction and film as two important, and as yet underexplored, sites where the interrelationship between translation and environmentality is thrown into sharp relief.<sup>26</sup>

### Methodology / Translation as Method

Taking 1945 as the historical starting point for my study, my dissertation is structured thematically, rather than chronologically, with each chapter treating a particular modality, or form, of translation. I employ this structure in order to emphasize how the elision of environmental violence—particularly in its racialized and gendered dimensions—is a historically recursive phenomenon, as well as to trouble the chronology that sees the transpacific as something that the west “turns” to in the twenty-first century. The bookending of the project by chapters on two Korean artists—film Bong Joon-ho and Kang, respectively—is likewise intended to signal the interlingual focus of the project.

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<sup>25</sup> Though less explicitly concerned with translation, this also a central claim of Amitav Ghosh's influential book *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2017). In it, Ghosh argues that “to look at the climate crisis through the prism of empire is to recognize, first, that the continent of Asia is conceptually critical to every aspect of global warming: its causes, its philosophical and historical implications, and the possibility of a global response to it. Yet, strangely, the implications are rarely reckoned with—and this may be because the discourse around the Anthropocene, and climate matters generally, remain largely Eurocentric.” (87)

<sup>26</sup> Though collected volumes on ecolinguistics (methodologies and case studies alike) have flourished in the past fifteen years, the discipline itself is in fact much older; Einar Haugen's book *The Ecology of Language* (Stanford University Press, 1972) is the pioneering work in the field.

My first chapter draws together the broad themes of this dissertation—transpacific history, translation, and ecological futurity—through a reading of Bong Joon-ho’s environmental filmography, focusing primarily on the 2013 blockbuster *Snowpiercer*. While critics have been quick to read *Snowpiercer* as a straightforward class drama or work of “cli-fi,” less attention has been paid to the linguistic dimensions of its dystopian narrative. The film underscores translation as a subtle yet powerful force that shapes how we “see”—or don’t see—environmental violence on a global scale. Reading moments of translation and communication failure in Bong’s film that seek to make strange (and strangely visible) the untenability of our global petrocapitalist system, I outline the environmental, political, and linguistic futures that *Snowpiercer* envisions and reflect on how these are taken up in a follow-up film, 2017’s *Okja*.

In the second chapter, I shift my focus to an Asian/ American author, Ruth Ozeki’s 2013 novel *A Tale for the Time Being*. Here, I argue that an attention to forms of translational work has important implications for transnational American studies, particularly in reorienting the field beyond its continental US and anglocentric bounds. Taking as its primary object of inquiry the “voluminous influx” of national, racial, and linguistic ‘otherness’ that David Palumbo-Liu describes as “a distinct feature of late twentieth century and early twenty first century age of globalization,” this chapter highlights translation’s central (and often acknowledged) role in shaping the ways in which that otherness is negotiated across geographical and temporal meridians. Applying this translational framework to the divergent accounts of historical disaster in the novel, I argue that, by calling attention to the untranslatable or unassimilable elements of these narratives, Ozeki eschews narrative cohesion and purity politics for a mode of empathic reading structured around “not knowing.”

My third chapter extends the critique of historical purity politics that Ozeki raises in *A Tale for the Time Being* to the nonhuman forms of life that populate Karen Tei Yamashita's 1991 novel, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*. My reading centers on Yamashita's deployment of plastic as a narrative device that subverts the historically-constituted boundaries between natural and artificial, healing and toxic, "first" and "third" worlds. The novel's narrator, a plastic ball that permanently floats in front of the head of a Japanese immigrant, is crucial to this articulation: through a narrative perspective that is uncomprehending of human emotion, the ball calls attention to the ways in which environmental violence is obscured by anthropocentric representational modes like the *novela* or the ethnography, which traffic—often unwittingly—in the destructive affect that Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia." I argue that, by deploying nonhuman translation as both a narrative device and a site for empathic identification, Yamashita prompts a consideration of what a transpacific history of slow violence might look like if humans were not at the center of the narrative.

In my fourth and final chapter, I revisit the controversial novel with which I began the dissertation: Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*. Here, I argue that the debate over the legitimacy *The Vegetarian's* translation is double-edged: while these discussions have brought the literary translation and its ideological and political implications into the realm of public discourse, the emphasis on translational quality—ie, whether or not the translation "works"—has had the odd effect of foreclosing substantive discussion on Kang's novel itself. By approaching the novel in this way, critics fail to meet the novel's translational politics—which are invested in unknowability, refusal, and silences—on their own terms. In an effort to counter this focus on the success (or failure) of Smith's translation, my reading instead seeks to show how the tropes of female violence, silence, and erasure treated in the novel signify in both Korean and English texts, while

considering what the failed project of (eco)feminist communion—present in both versions—might signify in a transpacific context.

In the conclusion, I move to situate the urgency of a translational reading praxis within the current context of global (re)ordering toward the pacific, and specifically China. While economists have been heralding the dawn of a new “Pacific Century” as early as the 1980s—following Japan’s postwar economic boom and the rise of the Four Asian Tigers—the transpacific turn was arguably cemented by the 2016 election of Donald Trump. With the recent restructuring of the Trans-Pacific Partnership and China’s “One Belt, One Road” development initiative, the axes of global economic power are shifting decidedly away from the United States. As U.S politics follow these literary and cultural productions in turning towards the transpacific, I argue that an attention to the nuances of translation—its ability, in particular, to function as both a counterpoetic practice and propaganda tool for the nation-state—will be especially crucial for charting these economic and geopolitical changes in the coming years.

## Chapter One: Translation Ecologies and Aberrant Translation in Bong Joon-ho's Environmental Films

Set in the dystopic near-future in the year 2032, Korean director Bong Joon-ho's *Snowpiercer* takes as its starting point an environmental disaster set in the temporal present (2014). An attempt to chemically counteract the global warming crisis through the use of a substance called CW-7 has failed, resulting in the freezing of the planet and the extinction of all life. The few people lucky enough to survive reside on a train commandeered by the prescient American genius, Dr. Wilford, who has designed a locomotive capable of circling the planet at the rate of one lap per year. It is, in many ways, a timely film—not only for the ecological and political issues that it addresses, but for the global scope of its critique. As a space, the train both encompasses and resists the idea of a coherent “nation” or national allegiance: though it houses an array of people from disparate countries and backgrounds, it hurtles across the globe unhinged from any territorial expanse.

While critics have been quick to read *Snowpiercer* as a straightforward class or work of “cli-fi,” less attention has been paid to the linguistic dimensions of its dystopian narrative.<sup>27</sup> The film underscores translation as a subtle yet powerful force that shapes how we see—or don't see—environmental violence on a global scale. Through moments of ecological collapse and communication failure, *Snowpiercer* emphasizes the

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<sup>27</sup> In his review of *Snowpiercer* for the *New Yorker*, for example, David Denby says that the film presents a portrait of oligarchical rule and underclass discontent ... fuelled by disgust for the decadent rich and admiration for the outraged poor” and likens it to recent post-apocalyptic blockbusters like *The Hunger Games* and *Elysium*. These kinds of associations, common to North American reviews of *Snowpiercer*, are problematic because they suggest that the film's success is due to its modelling on a kind of uniquely “American” dystopian formula and flatten the narrative ingenuity and multilingual specificity that make it so special. Perhaps more tellingly, Denby later likens Wilford to Dr. Fu Manchu, the controversial orientalist villain of Sax Rohmer's Yellow Peril pulp series, without a shred of irony or further qualification. See David Denby, “Endgames,” *New York Times*, July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/07/07/endgames>

untenability of our current petrocapitalist system and imagines, in its stead, a global future predicated on care for others and the planet rather than economic gain. The viability of this imagined future is crucially dependent on the practice of translation, aiding in the formation of empathic intranational connections and ensuring the survival of the planet. I argue that a reading of *Snowpiercer*'s climate-change narrative through the lens of translation reveals two problematic assumptions undergirding current discussions about climate change, environmental destruction, and the global. The first is an embrace of globalism that is both implicitly financial and articulated in (or through) the anglophone West. The second, related assumption is the notion that the work of translation is somehow an ideologically neutral act. This seemingly obvious concept is nevertheless important to keep in mind when considering how art and literature of the Anthropocene—already working to give expression and shape to a phenomenon that seems to resist representation altogether—is subject to further distortions as it is acted upon by translation, moving from one language system and cultural context to another.

My reading of the entanglements of globalism, environmental violence and translation in Bong's oeuvre is twofold. I begin by situating *Snowpiercer*—and Bong's work more generally—within the current cinematic climate of the United States. While a version of global cinema has been embraced by North American critics, I argue that the circulation difficulties *Snowpiercer* faced bely a certain inflexibility around the kinds of international releases allowed to circulate in American theatres, especially when these films grapple with politically exigent issues like climate change. I then move to a more formal reading of *Snowpiercer*'s eco-dystopian narrative, which I suggest uses several strategies of translation make strange (and strangely *visible*) the anglocentric and North American underpinnings of our global petrocapitalist system. The first of these strategies occurs at the level of form, as *Snowpiercer*'s collaborative script, which transforms a

French graphic novel into a bilingual (Korean / English) production featuring a multilingual cast, enfolding the processes of translation—or of moving across media, language, and national contexts—into the very fabric of the film. But *Snowpiercer* also thematizes the ways in which translation work plays—and has played, historically—an important role shaping the kinds of violence and atrocities that are visible on a global scale. In this way, the film also deploys what we might characterize as a narrative translation of “slow violence”—that is, for the historically-iterated irruptions of environmental violence that occur “gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.”<sup>28</sup> Drawing here on Brent Edwards’ concept of *décalage*—which denotes the “kernel of precisely that which cannot be transferred or exchanged,” in translational encounters and often presents as temporal lags or disruptions—I read *Snowpiercer* for moments of temporal asynchronicity that punctuate its environmental critique, compacting its would-be utopian ending.<sup>29</sup> I conclude with a consideration of the futures—environmental, political, and linguistic—that *Snowpiercer*’s ending envisions, and how its sequel, *Okja* (2017), reinforces or complicates these in its own critique of global environmental issues.

### Translation as Genre, or, the Anglocentric Demands of “Global” Cinema

Though *Snowpiercer* imagines a world in the dystopian future, it bears, as is typical of its genre, an uncanny resemblance to our current moment. The hierarchical configuration of

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<sup>28</sup> Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2

<sup>29</sup> Edwards, Brent Hayes. *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 14

its train in particular —with the lowest class, most destitute passengers in the “tail section”—points to the unsettling durability of certain structures, like class, in this post-apocalyptic hermetic space. The train is, we are told, “a closed ecological system [in which the total] number of units must be very closely, precisely controlled in order to maintain the proper sustainable balance.” Given the limited resources aboard the train, the ecosystem must be maintained through highly artificial—and violent—manipulation, with the lowest class section inevitably bearing the brunt of the brutality. In the tail section, people are gunned down periodically in a gruesome approximation of “natural selection,” forced to eat reconstituted cockroach bars for sustenance (we are told in the early days of the train they had to eat each other), and have their children taken from them to labor on the “eternal engine” at the front of the train.

The main plot of the film involves a tail section uprising led by a man named Curtis (Chris Evans) and a security specialist named Nam Goong Minsoo (Song Kang-ho), who overtake the train section by section in order to recoup the stolen children. As the tail section rebels weave through these successive cabins, the full scope of this “delicate ecosystem”—and its reliance on a brutal suppression of the lower-class passengers—comes into view. The trappings of luxury that we see in the upper section, from lush greenhouses to sushi and steak and chambers devoted to eternal parties, are made possible only by depriving the tail section passengers, or else using them for labour, resources, and even body parts.

But despite the familiarity and appeal of this class-based uprising narrative, and despite being met with acclaim by critics at limited early screenings worldwide, *Snowpiercer* nearly missed American audiences in the summer of 2013. The film, Bong’s first predominantly English language release, had a budget of 40 million dollars, making

it the most expensive South Korean film yet made.<sup>30</sup> Postproduction conflicts between Bong and the Weinstein Company ensued shortly after Harvey Weinstein purchased the distribution rights for *Snowpiercer* in six English-speaking countries. Concerns were raised about the length of the film and clarity of its message, with Weinstein fretting that Bong's critique of class politics and global warming might be too densely allegorical for theatregoers in "Iowa and Oklahoma."<sup>31</sup> The Weinstein Company issued a long list of proposed changes to Bong's 119 minute film, including slashing 25 minutes of crucial characterization and dialogue and suggesting that Weinstein Sr.'s close personal "friend," renowned British science fiction writer Neil Gaiman, pen some contextualizing voiceovers.<sup>32</sup> These changes, one can only assume, were proffered in the hopes of molding *Snowpiercer* to resemble a more conventional action blockbuster, and Bong took great offence to them, refusing to acquiesce to The Weinstein Company's demands.

It is important to note how this anxiety over the legibility of *Snowpiercer*'s message presumes a homogeneity amongst English-speaking viewership, one that moves from the locally situated to the global. What in fact gets masked by this rhetorical gloss—where a supposed concern for audiences in the rural U.S is projected onto English-speaking audiences worldwide—is a larger concern for the film's profitability. Despite growing global interest in Asian cinema, many of Asia's top directors—Wong Kar-Wai, Park Chan-wook, and Bong among them—have had an exceedingly difficult time screening their work internationally, often having to endure excessive cuts to their films under the pretense of making their work more legible to western audiences (Weinstein, for his part, has earned the nickname "Scissorhands" due to the compulsive cutting he does to the

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<sup>30</sup> Tony Rayns, "Blockage on the Line," *Sight and Sound* 24, vol. 1 (2014) pp.38-4.

<sup>31</sup> Rayns, "Blockage," 39

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

foreign language films he acquires).<sup>33</sup> But if this precedent is born out of the assumption that English-speaking audiences are less likely to turn out in droves to view a film with subtitles, what do we make of the fact that Asian directors who produce films in English are often subjected to the same principle? Why should a largely English language film like *Snowpiercer*, which counts big American stars like Octavia Spencer and Chris Evans (Captain America himself!) amongst its multinational cast, seem such an odd fit for mass circulation in American theatres?

The answer to this lies partly with the fact that films in languages (or from perspectives) presumed to be not the director's "own" are often viewed as inauthentic—a damaging charge, no doubt, and one to which Asian directors and writers are particularly vulnerable.<sup>34</sup> Weinstein's suggestion that Neil Gaiman narrate the film—to paper, quite literally, the western voice over the Korean-composed dialogue—can be read as revealing an anxiety over who gets to speak an authoritative English. Conversely, the move to English-language filmmaking is also frequently read as a kind of betrayal in non-Western countries like Korea, where the US has long been a meddling military and cultural presence. Many Korean critics saw Bong's move to Hollywood as signalling the end of Korean national cinema. As one Korean critic glibly put it (and taking a jab at *Snowpiercer* in the process): 2012 was "the year the Chungmoro train left for

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid. Though this traffic in film-editing at the level of script is largely unidirectional, it bears mentioning that North American films screened in Asia (and South Korea in particular) have at times been subjected to censorship and boycott, particularly in the post IMF climate when many NGOs signed on to the "boycott Hollywood film" campaign, designed to buttress Korea's national film industry. For more on this, see HyeRyoung Ok's "The Politics of the Korean Blockbuster: Narrating the Nation and the Spectacle of Glocalization in 2009 *Lost Memories*," *The Spectator - the University of Southern California Journal of Film and Television*, 29, no. 2 (2009), 37-46

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Hong Sohn's *Racial Asymmetries: Asian American Fictional Worlds* (New York: NYU Press, 2014) explores this dynamic in the Asian American literary tradition, namely, the expectations around "Asian" thematics that get projected onto fiction by Asian American authors and the question of whether or not a writer of mixed Asian or non-Asian origins can produce a work of Asian American literature.

Hollywood.”<sup>35</sup>

*Snowpiercer*’s centering around issues of climate change also contributed significantly to its delayed release. Media scholar Gill Branston has suggested that such delays are typical of the climate change blockbuster: the spectacular nature shots for which the genre is known, for instance, take copious amounts of time and manpower to shoot, often tying up the production process.<sup>36</sup> There is also the matter of ensuring that the film’s narrative can travel; that it has “extreme translatability” for global audiences—a process that can take months or even years to unfold.<sup>37</sup> The case of *Snowpiercer* is especially instructive, then, because the delays in its production persisted *in spite of* its adherence to these aesthetic ideals. The film’s plot is, as I have shown, immediately recognizable within the generic landscape of the Hollywood blockbuster, so there ought not to be a question about its global legibility. What the struggle over the release of *Snowpiercer* ultimately raises is the question of who gets to narrate global climate change—and in what language. Indeed, where Bong’s film deviates most sharply from more immediately recognizable climate change blockbusters (*The Day After Tomorrow*, *Geostorm*) is in its refusal to cast the United States as the de-facto solution to the ecological catastrophes we currently face as a planet.<sup>38</sup> The strategic multilingualism that *Snowpiercer* employs—and which I attend to in greater detail in the following section—likewise calls attention to the problematic anglocentrism underpinning climate change

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<sup>35</sup> Eun-ha Baek, “tojön! hölliudü pakch’anuk, kimjiun, pongjunho 3inüi kamdok 3saek peirül pötta.” [in Korean] *Kyöngnyang ilbo*, March 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012,

[http://news.khan.co.kr/kh\\_news/khan\\_art\\_view.html?artid=201203212149475&code=90401](http://news.khan.co.kr/kh_news/khan_art_view.html?artid=201203212149475&code=90401)

Baek’s article explores Bong’s departure for Hollywood on the heels of two other major Korean directors, Kim Ji-un (*Last Stand*, 2013) and Park Chan-ook (*Stoker*, 2013). Chungmoro train station is located on two major subway lines in Seoul and is recognized as an important site for cinema in the city, hosting the Chungmoro International Musical Film Festival (formerly Chungmoro International Film Festival).

<sup>36</sup> Branston 219

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> See Branston for an extended discussion of this in relation to *The Day After Tomorrow*.

discourse in both academic and public spheres. While anthropologists and other climate change scholars are beginning, if slowly, to emphasize issues of translation in their work, the impact of big budget, multilingual blockbusters like *Snowpiercer* in responding to issues of climate change cannot be understated.<sup>39</sup> By intervening in this traditionally U.S.-centric genre and changing the directional flow of these narratives, Bong's film reframes climate change as a distinctly global issue, one that needs to be articulated in multiple languages.

The release trajectory of *Snowpiercer* and its widespread success on the Video-on-Demand (VOD) market likewise reflects a global appetite for such alternative narratives about climate change. The Weinstein Company's decision to give Bong's final cut of *Snowpiercer* a very limited theatrical release—it initially screened in just eight theaters across the United States—was uniformly panned by film critics and enthusiasts online, with the criticism eventually grew so heated that the company agreed to an VOD release just to avoid the bad publicity. This turned out to be a lucrative decision, with the VOD release quickly outearning the theatrical, despite a three week head start by the latter.<sup>40</sup> Though it would only be partially accurate to say that this was a wholesale victory of *Snowpiercer's* viewing public over the Weinstein Company—the company was, after all, quick to glean the possibility of profit within the VOD release of the film—*Snowpiercer's* viewership reconfigures the networks of power that have traditionally governed film production and reception by rejecting the North American producer's "translation" of

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<sup>39</sup> Anthropologist Peter Rudiak-Gould's work on the ways in which translation issues have shaped discussions about climate change in the Marshall Islands is an example of the kind of intervention I'm thinking of here. See Rudiak-Gould, "Promiscuous Corroboration and Climate Change Translation: a Case Study from the Marshall Islands." *Global Environmental Change* 22 (2012), 46-54.

<sup>40</sup> Brian Brooks, "'Snowpiercer' VOD More than Doubles U.S. Gross to Nearly \$11 Million." *Deadline*, September 7<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <https://deadline.com/2014/09/snowpiercer-vod-box-office-radius-twc-bong-joon-ho-830834/>

the film in favor of the authoritative original.<sup>41</sup> That *Snowpiercer*'s tremendous financial success derived primarily from international screenings is likewise significant, as it frames this network of power as a diffuse international configuration and not the purview of North America alone.<sup>42</sup> *Snowpiercer*'s diverse viewership emblemizes a new network formation, one that decenters the privileged position of the US moviegoer and rejects the idea that North American production companies should "translate"—ie, structurally manipulate and cut—non-anglophone films for their international audiences. It is with this spirit of a truly global, multilingual cinema in mind that I situate Bong's oeuvre within South Korea's cinematic culture and read the entwined critiques of climate change and translation at play in *Snowpiercer*.

### *Snowpiercer* and Bong's Eco-Translational Turn

As a seasoned filmmaker and one of South Korea's most esteemed directors, Bong is no stranger to controversy surrounding his work. Since the release of his breakout hit *Memories of Murder* in 2003, Bong has been something of a polarizing figure in South Korean film circles: critics praise the striking aesthetic range of his films—their signature dark expressiveness—but struggle with the imprint of American generic conventions on Korean political thematics. The 2006 monster blockbuster *The Host* is emblematic of this critical ambivalence: though the film's sweeping success at the South Korean box office

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<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Pomerantz, "What the Economics of 'Snowpiercer' Say About the Future of Film." *Forbes*, September 8<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dorothypomerantz/2014/09/08/what-the-economics-of-snowpiercer-say-about-the-future-of-film>. Pomerantz suggests that the VOD release was actually part of the marketing strategy for the film all along, but this account does not square with the very public conflict between Bong and the Weinsteins played out online prior to the film's release. Early film critics like Rayns were likewise under the impression that the film might not ever be screened internationally.

<sup>42</sup> Pomerantz describes *Snowpiercer*'s North American VOD and box-office yield of 4.4 and 6.5 million dollars as "not huge numbers," emphasizing that the film made the majority of its 98 million dollar gross through the international box office.

was a boon to the domestic film industry, its borrowing from foreign genres, like the Japanese *Kaiju* film or the Hollywood nature-horror blockbuster, was seen by many to signal a move away from the Korean political themes that had animated earlier works like *Memories of Murder*.<sup>43</sup> Drawing on an event in recent South Korean history—in which a US army officer stationed in Seoul was convicted of dumping formaldehyde directly into the city's sewage system—*The Host* imagines a monster dwelling in the Han river as the mutant (by)product of U.S./ROK relations at the dawn of the new millennium, more than a half-century after the Korean Armistice Agreement halted the hostilities on the Korean peninsula.<sup>44</sup>

American critics have tended to read *The Host*'s generic ambiguity as deliberately subversive. In an article on the import of Korean cinema to American studies scholarship, for instance, Christina Klein suggests that in *The Host* Hollywood and its generic conventions emerge as “object[s] rather than an agent[s] of globalization, a reservoir of symbolic resources from which Korean filmmakers draw as they navigate their way through their own globalized cultural economy.”<sup>45</sup> But such readings of Bong's work, in their eagerness to show how his repurposing of Hollywood conventions work to reorient the transnational flows of global cinema, often reinscribe, if unwittingly, the very cleft between “West” (Hollywood) and “Other” (non-Hollywood) that they purport to refute.<sup>46</sup> The question that a film like *The Host*—which straddles two distinct cultural,

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<sup>44</sup> Don Kirk gives a good gloss of the so-called “McFarland Incident” for the International Herald Tribune (later reprinted in the New York Times). “US Dumping of Chemicals riles Koreans,” *New York Times*, July 15<sup>th</sup>, 2000, <https://www.nytimes.com/2000/07/15/news/us-dumping-of-chemical-riles-koreans.html>

<sup>45</sup> Christina Klein, “Why American Studies Needs to Pay Attention to Korean Cinema, or, Transnational Genres in the Films of Bong Joon-ho.” *American Quarterly* 60, vol 4 (2008), 873.

<sup>46</sup> Nikki JY Lee, “Localized Globalization and a Monster National: The Host and the South Korean Film Industry.” *Cinema Journal* 50, no. 3 (2011), 46.

historical, and aesthetic traditions—seems to pose is this: is it possible to read a blockbuster from a non-anglophone context without using Hollywood as a (the) organizing principle? What would such a reading look like? Put differently, how might a critic working from an anglophone frame of reference remain sensitive to issues of language and cultural specificity underwriting the politics of a film like *The Host*?

It is here that a turn towards translation is instructive. While a full reading of *The Host* is beyond the scope of this chapter, I venture that Bong's decision not to preserve the Korean title for the film—*koemul*; literally, "monster," or "grotesque creature"—informs the way we ought to read his post-2006 oeuvre. In an interview with journalist Moon Seok for Korean cinema journal *Cine 21* in the weeks after *The Host's* release, Bong distinguishes his film from typical Hollywood monster offerings, which are overwhelmingly preoccupied with the questions of how to trap, or kill, the creature at the center of the action. *The Host*, by contrast, focuses on the ethics of care—familial, cultural, and interspecies—that the incursion of a monster into the social world of the film generates. And because this ethics of care is culturally-situated, Bong suggests, crucially, that it requires some element of translational creativity in order to resonate outside of the domestic Korean context.<sup>47</sup> The English title "host"—in its evocation of relations both sociological (guest/host) and biological (virus/host)—evokes this ethics of care across species lines in a way that the direct English translation cannot of *goemul* cannot. As Meera Lee puts it:

The dual meaning of the word *host*, in both the biological and sociological sense, conveys Bong's intention [for the circulation and reception of the film] more effectively. This might warn us that situating *The Host* in terms of the culturally dominant assumptions of the genre, that is, Hollywood (the West) as a center and Korea (the East) as a margin, might prevent us from more accurately

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<sup>47</sup>Moon Seok, "Interview with Bong Joon-ho." [in Korean] *Cine 21*, July 20th, 2006, [http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag\\_id=39953](http://www.cine21.com/news/view/?mag_id=39953).

understanding Bong's film, as well as Korean cinema in general.<sup>48</sup> In order to disentangle Bong's filmography from the center-periphery models of global cinema through which it has typically been read, it is important to recognize how Bong's comments frame *The Host* as a film with a pointed interest in the translational underpinnings of the transnational, and not simply in the transnational writ large. I argue that this distinction contextualizes two aspects of Bong's transnational vision, or what critics have frequently referred to as his "global" turn.<sup>49</sup> The first is the centrality of translation work, particularly of the collaborative variety, to any project that positions itself as trans-or-international. The 2008 film *Tokyo!*, a multilingual production co-shot with French filmmakers Leos Carax and Michel Gondry, is an early example of this collaborative translational praxis. The second aspect concerns the intersection of translation work and environmentality. What is singular about Bong's environmental films is their insistence that a truly "global" ethics of care for the planet is only possible if translation work is reckoned with in a meaningful way. My aim in what follows is to track the aesthetic and political implications of this eco-translational critique in *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*, focusing on the ways in which the production trajectories and thematic structuring of both films reject the translational purity politics that typically underwrite non-anglophone films that find an audience in the US.

Bong acknowledges this move away from the localized concerns of his earlier work in an interview with David Chen, where he explains his decision to write a

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<sup>48</sup> Meera Lee, "Monstrosity and Humanity in Bong Joon-ho's *The Host*." *Positions: Asia Critique* 26, No. 4 (2018), 720

<sup>49</sup> Anthony Carew's description of this shift is representative: "Whereas Bong's early films were more about Korean social issues, his two international, English-language pictures have been about broader, global issues; each, in its own way, is about globalisation." From "Generic Interventions: Tropes and Tropicality in the Films of Bong Joon-ho." *Metro*, no. 194 (2017), 56

predominantly English screenplay for *Snowpiercer*: “It’s about humanity, humans living in a system. It felt very universal, and I wanted to make a sci-fi film,” he said. “It wasn’t about, ‘let’s do an English language film.’ Just by the nature of the story, with all these different types of people on the train, it lent itself to casting people from various countries. It would’ve been rather strange if we’d just had Koreans—South Koreans and North Koreans—in this environment. So it became a 70-80% English language project, with other languages mixed in there as well.”<sup>50</sup> *Snowpiercer* was, from the outset, a decidedly collaborative production across linguistic lines: Bong dictated the screenplay to Kelly Masterson, the screenwriter of the Sidney Lumet film *Before the Devil Knows You’re Dead*, through a translator, and the concept itself was adapted from the French graphic novel *Le Transperceneige*, created by Jacques Lob and Jean-Marc Rochette. The film’s very structure, then, is rooted in translation, in the shuffling between multiple languages, genres, and forms.

Brent Edwards’s conception of “*décalage*” from *The Practice of Diaspora* is instructive in thinking through the way linguistic difference is articulated in *Snowpiercer*. Although Edwards is writing specifically about black diasporic encounters with the francophone world, his work provides a deeply insightful model for thinking through global cinema’s contribution to translation studies and the function of translation within the larger global network of meaning-making and racial formation.<sup>51</sup> Building on the

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<sup>50</sup> David Chen, “Bong Joon-ho Talks Using Violence, Writing an English Script, and Getting the Final Cut of *Snowpiercer*.” *Slashfilm*, June 27th, 2014. <http://www.slashfilm.com/bong-joon-ho-snowpiercer-interview/>

<sup>51</sup> Film theorists have sometimes used *décalage* in their readings of global cinema but tend to focus on the temporal aspect of the term - the asynchronicity that inheres in the production of a film, for instance, and the delay(s) in its production, reception, and circulation that constitute a kind of “jet lag.” I prefer Edwards’ understanding of *décalage* because it preserves this temporal meaning while emphasizing the untranslatable quality of the term, highlighting the centrality of translation to any project with a global reader-or-viewership.

work of postcolonial critics like Stuart Hall, who are interested in the ways diasporic discourses articulate difference, Edwards argues for an attention to not only the linguistic dimensions of these conceptions of difference but a renewed attention to “the trace or residue ... of what escapes translation.” Edwards takes “*décalage*” as the signal term for his theory of translation for precisely its untranslatable quality—its meaning of restoring a prior unevenness, which has no equivalent in English. In the French, he notes, “*décalage*” is used to express such manifold concepts as “gap, discrepancy, time-lag, interval ... even sometimes jet lag.”<sup>52</sup>

In this sense, *décalage* is a particularly productive term for thinking through the way diasporic difference is articulated in Bong’s film, whose national allegiances can be difficult to situate. Edwards has suggested, in this vein, that “*décalage* is proper to the structure of a diasporic “racial” formation, and its return in the form of *disarticulation*—the points of misunderstanding, bad faith, unhappy translation—must “be considered a necessary haunting.”<sup>53</sup> Read this way, there is a sense in which the titular train of *Snowpiercer*—as a site that at once houses people from diverse and far-flung diasporic backgrounds, seals them in a hermetic enclave, and yet travels the world untethered to any nation or country—must also be such haunted grounds, acted on by the linguistic and historical memories of the people who inhabit it. Accents in *Snowpiercer* are significant because they remain the one vestige of the passengers’ nationality, the trace or residue—the *décalé*, to use Edwards’ formulation—of a lingering, or haunting, diasporic identity. The film is rife with moments in which non-English languages and accents punctuate the denouement—as, for example, when a Irish passenger says “sumimasen” to a fellow tail-section bunker, or when a German porter and North African man (who is

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<sup>52</sup> Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora*, 13

<sup>53</sup> Edwards, 14

making sushi) exchange a few words in French. These exchanges work to decenter English and call attention to the various ways that power is construed through the insistence on a single language.

The artificial—and, often violent—imposition of English as the authoritative language is expressly satirized in one compelling scene, in which representatives from the “head” section—which controls the “sacred engine” of the train—visit the tail section. After measuring the tail section children (and offering no explanation for doing this), the representatives take two children to the front of the train, causing the children’s parents to spur a revolt. After one of the representatives is injured in the struggle, Wilford’s assistant Mason—played by a wonderfully overdrawn Tilda Swinton—dictates to the rest of the tail section the rationale behind the punishment that is to be doled out (the man will hold his bare arm outside of an arm-sized hole in the train for exactly seven minutes; it will freeze solid and then be broken off). As she begins to speak about a logic of “preordained positions,” some aides from the head section begin to translate her words into different languages, only to be quickly cut off again. “No, we don’t have time for all that,” Mason interrupts, “we’ve only got seven minutes!”

It’s a small moment, easily lost in the arresting cinematography and action of the film, but one which registers the ways in which language and the linguistic dimensions of domination are critiqued in the film. There is, in this scene, both too much and too little time: time is compressed (as signaled by the large clock around the condemned man’s neck), but there is also not enough time to translate the explanation. This scene stages the representational crisis at the heart of Rob Nixon’s important book, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, which attempts to reckon with the “long dyings—the staggered and staggeringly discounted casualties, both human and ecological” that are a

direct consequence of environmental damage wrought by global capitalism.<sup>54</sup> Because the people most affected by slow violence are “the global poor,” little attention is paid to the sustained biological devastation wrought by western capitalist greed worldwide. The arrangement of passengers by class (and not nationality or ethnic / linguistic background) is thus central to the film's environmental critique. The film questions “the long-term sustainability of a world whose economy is increasingly globalized and yet whose resources are increasingly unshared”—a system made possible, Nixon suggests, through a “literal concretizing of ‘out of sight out of mind.’”<sup>55</sup> This scene forces the viewer to take in the the processes that make possible this very ecosystem through a speeding up of the “slow”—i.e long term, insidious, attritional—violence inflicted on the global poor, translating it, as it were, and making it visible. The critique of global warming and of global English coalesce here, as both visual and linguistic language fail to render the full scope of the currently-unfolding crisis. A global economy, undergirded by implicitly American or Western ideals of hegemonic “progress,” can only appear successful and vibrant if the wage labor and environmental destruction that necessarily accompany it are ignored or left untranslated. In scenes such as these, Bong speeds up time to show the consequences of climate change that are always figured in popular discourse as yet-to-come or happening elsewhere, while emphasizing the bodies of the global poor as the sites where this attritional violence is most pronounced.

*Snowpiercer* is thus animated by two translative impulses: a strategic multilingualism that calls attention to the ways power is imposed through an insistence on a singular authoritative language, and what we might characterize as a narrative

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<sup>54</sup> Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 2

<sup>55</sup> Nixon, *Slow Violence*, 20

translation of slow violence. This second version of translation—what we might also properly call a kind of historical translation—is slipperier to grasp, but becomes clearer if read through the strategies of the first. If a part of the film's project is to challenge the largely monolingual (Anglophone) unfoldings of climate change discourse—a project it bears out through multilingual interruptions and moments of translational refusal—we see a similar logic of disruption at work in the film's account of the history of environmental degradation. At first glance, *Snowpiercer* appears to ascribe to the dominant narrative that locates the acceleration of climate change within the Industrial Revolution, roughly between 1760-1840.<sup>56</sup> The titular train of the film is evocative of the coal and steam engines synonymous with this era, as is, certainly, its rigid organization by class. The origins of the environmental disaster at the center of the film, explained via voiceover during the opening credits, likewise squares with accounts of the Anthropocene era in which a homogenous *Anthropos* (here, "mankind") is collectively responsible for the destruction of the planet.<sup>57</sup>

But *Snowpiercer*'s depiction of climate change history is not as simple as it might initially appear: throughout the film, these master narratives are frequently disrupted by historical spectres that belie the complex relations of power, domination, and control that led to the environmental catastrophe at hand—relations that often resist viewing altogether. Consider, for instance, the recursive element to *Snowpiercer*'s version of world history. If the locomotive of modernity was organized by a racist and classist system we

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<sup>56</sup> Paul Crutzen, progenitor of the term "Anthropocene," subscribes to this timeline. See "The Geology of Mankind: the Anthropocene." *Nature* 415, vol 3, 2002, 23.

<sup>57</sup> Jason W. Moore has criticized Anthropocene theorists for this generalizing tendency. He writes: "the Anthropocene makes for an easy story. Easy, because it does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity's strategic relations of power and production. It is an easy story to tell because it does not ask us to think about these relations *at all*." "The Rise of Cheap Natures," in *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism* (PM Press: Oakland, 2016), 82

now recognize as being “of another time,” Bong suggests that this kind of disciplinary arrangement of bodies has simply found new expression in the category of the global poor. As a social body, the “global poor,” like the process of slow violence itself, poses representational difficulties. The film attempts, on some level, to register this “global” aspect sartorially—with costume designer Catherine George drawing inspiration from “African child soldiers” and “Indian street beggars,” for the tail section passengers’ clothing—but the effect is largely disjunctive, particularly given that Curtis and Tanya (Chris Evans and Octavia Spencer) are the tail section passengers with the most screen time.<sup>58</sup> There is, in other words, an inescapably American specificity to Evans’ and Spencer’s onscreen presences, one that evokes—or, arguably, traffics in—some of US cinema’s favored tropes of whiteness and blackness, with the former framed as masculinist and heroic, the latter as feminized, tragic, and buffoonish. In one disturbing scene, Octavia Spencer’s character screams “chicken! I want chicken!” during a third class uprising, re-entrenching one of the ugliest stereotypes borne out of America’s long history of antiblack racism. Another reference to this history comes in the form of Alex Haley’s seminal work *Roots*, the only title barely perceptible in Dr. Wilford’s library at the end of the film. What to do with these references in a project that seems to insist, at every turn, on an account of climate change in which the U.S is decentered both linguistically and territorially?

On the one hand, these disruptive and unsettling gestures force us to acknowledge the living legacies of a system in which the lines between human, animal, and nature were contentiously drawn (and redrawn) in concert with the system of chattel slavery.

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<sup>58</sup> Gavia Baker-Whitelaw, “Interview: ‘Snowpiercer’ Costume Designer Catherine George.” *Hellotailor.com* (blog), July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2014, <http://hellotailor.blogspot.kr/2014/07/interview-with-snowpiercer-costume.html>

Many theories of the Anthropocene, in turning on such taken-for-granted categories as “nature,” and “the human,” actively disavow this history; the move to situate the origins of climate change within the Industrial Revolution—the fault of kind of generalized “mankind”—performs a similar erasure. In order to avoid such violent elisions, then, there needs to be a conceptual and temporal reframing around the very concept of ecological collapse itself. Jason W. Moore suggests that such a critical (re)orientation must begin by addressing the legacies of slavery, settler colonialism, and exploitation and extraction under capitalism. He writes:

To locate modernity’s origins through the steam engine and coal pit is to prioritize the shutting down of steam engines and coal pits. (And their 21st century incarnations.) To locate the origins of the modern world with the rise of capitalism after 1450, with its audacious strategies of global conquest, cultural commodification, and relentless rationalization, is to prioritize a different politics—one that pursues the fundamental transformation of the relations of power, knowledge, and capital that have made the modern world. Shut down a coal plant, and you can slow global warming for a day; shut down the relations that made the coal plant, and you can stop it for good.<sup>59</sup>

Read this way, *Snowpiercer*’s references to the legacies of slavery take on new resonance. These gestures, which unsettle the otherwise generic climate change narrative of the film, point to the inadequacy of Anthropocene theory that does not address (and reckon with) these long hauntings. The film also demands that we read these instances beyond an American-historical frame, as part of a much longer trajectory of global capitalist development that relied universally on free labor, enslavement, and anti-black ideology to carry out its extractive policies. In the same way that *Snowpiercer* deploys multilingualism and moments of translational rupture to challenge the problematic anglocentrism of climate change discourse, then, it conjures these histories to emphasize the impossibility of a future that does not reckon meaningfully with the injustices of the past.

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<sup>59</sup> Moore, “The Rise of Cheap Natures,” 94

Although *Snowpiercer* is, at its core, a deeply ambivalent film, we get glimpses of what such a reckoning might look like in its final scenes. It concludes with an explosion that destroys the train and leaves but two survivors: Yona (Go Ah-sung), a seventeen-year-old train baby of Korean descent, and Timmy (Marcanthonee Reis), a seven-year-old train baby of African American descent. Because these two individuals were born on the train, they have no reference point for the “natural” or for the history that preceded Wilford’s experiment. Their presence in the post-train world, then, allows Bong to weigh whether or not one can—per Moore’s idiom—do away with “the relations that made the coal plant,” or if these relations will simply reproduce themselves under new circumstances. *Snowpiercer*’s final scene plays on this fundamental ambiguity. Atmospherically, its final frames are discordant with the dark and oppressive atmosphere of the rest of the film, marked by an overwhelming, almost oppressive whiteness. As these two unlikely survivors emerge onto a snowy tabula rasa, wearing fur coats stolen from passengers in the train’s drug den, a polar bear emerges in the distance. While the presence of this creature is initially marked as optimistic—its emergence on the scene is accompanied by a groundswell of triumphant classical music—this sense of hope is quickly replaced by a mounting fear. Bong heightens this affect through a series of quick cross cuts between Yona’s face and that of their arctic friend, as though to say: one of us will become food for the other. But what is so poignant about this ending—and what enables it to move beyond the suggestion that history’s exploitative relations of power will simply repeat themselves here—are its three final players. The presence of a black male, Asian female, and nonhuman animal at the end of this dystopian narrative gestures towards an alternative future, one that has arguably never before been staged in a Hollywood blockbuster or gleaned in the pages of a mainstream history book.

Indeed, this final scene seems integral to the question of *Snowpiercer*’s

screenability, for the image of these two nonwhite survivors, emerging from the wreckage of empire, seems to put too baldly a truth about the untenable forms of environmental, economic, and social slow violence waged by America against the global poor. Since the film's worldwide release in 2014, two related works have been released or are in production: the first is a television spinoff produced by Marty Adelstein's Tomorrow Studios (to be written by *Avatar 2*'s Josh Friedman). The other, an environmental blockbuster titled *Okja* and directed by Bong himself, was released in summer 2017. While the television series has lingered in production, plagued by writerly and directorial disputes over how to translate Bong's vision for the small screen, *Okja* was released to critical and commercial acclaim, and in many ways extends the critique of global capitalism and monolingualism that *Snowpiercer* raises. In what follows, I consider how *Okja* yokes the practice of interlingual (and interspecies) communication to an ethics of care for the planet, and, in so doing, bypasses the translational criteria that have often determined (and delimited) the screening trajectories of non-anglophone films in the western world.

### Translational Futures: The Case of *Okja*

Though not a straightforward sequel to *Snowpiercer*, *Okja* is, in many ways, a companion piece to Bong's dystopian blockbuster. The titular *Okja* is one of twenty-six "super pigs" genetically engineered by the US conglomerate Mirando (perhaps a metonym for real-life agrochemical company Monsanto) and raised in different locales across the world over the course of ten years. When *Okja* is crowned "best super pig" by the corporation, she is taken from her home in South Korea to the Mirando lab in New York city, where she will undergo a battery of tests before being sent to the slaughterhouse. *Okja* explores the actions of two distinct parties—the animal rights activists of the Animal Liberation

Front (A.L.F), and Mija (Ahn So-hyeon), the young Korean girl who raised Okja—to save the pig from slaughter, with an eye to the different ethical motivations that undergird their respective efforts. Both *Snowpiercer* and *Okja* engage issues of environmentality and ethics through a global, multilingual narrative and are decidedly transnational collaborative productions. Like *Snowpiercer*, *Okja* was shot in multiple national locations (South Korea, Canada, and the United States) and stars prominent actors from both Korea (Ahn Seo-hyeon, Choi Woo-shik) and Hollywood (Tilda Swinton, Jake Gyllenhaal, Steven Yeun). At the level of production and circulation, however, *Okja* diverges sharply from its predecessor. Rather than seek distribution rights with a major Hollywood production company—and risk the delays and editorial impositions that came with *Snowpiercer*’s TWC partnership—with *Okja* Bong opted to release the film via Netflix’s streaming service, one of the first major multi-million-dollar productions to do so. While this partnership made *Okja* immediately accessible to audiences in 140 countries worldwide, it was not an altogether popular decision. *Okja*’s circulation via the movie-streaming website not only rendered its generic status ambiguous, but provoked resentment from theater owners—both in the U.S and elsewhere—who wanted to screen the film but were unable to because of licensing restrictions.<sup>60</sup> When *Okja* screened at Cannes, the Netflix logo was met with boos and jeers from the audience, prompting an emergency meeting with festival organizers; it was eventually announced that all films that premiered at the festival would require theatrical distribution in France as a bare minimum (Travers 2017).

Netflix’s restrictions over *Okja*’s theatrical screenings were received with particular hostility in South Korea, a country where domestic theatrical releases comprise

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<sup>60</sup> “Is it a movie? Or is it a Netflix streaming event?” Peter Travers asks in his *Rolling Stone* review of the film. “Okja Review: Story of a Girl and her Giant Pig is Wacky, Weird and Wonderful,” June 28, 2017, <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/okja-review-story-of-girl-and-her-giant-pig-is-wacky-weird-and-wonderful-202927/>

the bulk of the film industry's revenue and the act of supporting homegrown cinema is often seen as an act of nationalist pride.<sup>61</sup> The streaming giant's offer to assign a dual "screen-and-stream" date for *Okja* in South Korea—where the Netflix and cineplex versions would premiere at the same time—was especially unpopular, with major distributors rightly claiming that the offer violated the industry-standard three week holdback before a film is released for streaming. In the end, *Okja* was barred from 93% of South Korean screens, showing only in independent cinemas across the country.<sup>62</sup> But while this limited screening seems, at first blush, cruelly evocative of *Snowpiercer's* restricted international release, *Okja's* Netflix partnership did not deter Korean viewers from supporting the film. In fact, following *Okja's* July 3rd release, South Korean Netflix users more than doubled, going from 97,922 subscribers to 202,587 in one week's time.<sup>63</sup> Read this way, Bong's Netflix partnership can be seen as fostering a more equitable film environment in South Korea, enabling *Okja's* would-be audience to choose their preferred method for viewing the film while encouraging, at the same time, the support of local, independently-owned cinemas.

Given the meteoric rise and spread of *Hallyu* in many of Netflix' target markets, Bong's partnership also makes sense from a financial perspective. As South Korean cinema emerges, per Hye-seung Chung and David Scott Diffrient, as "one of the newest discoveries for Western cinephiles," *Okja* joins the ranks of South Korean films and dramas "that bring cultural cachet, if not huge profits, to Netflix, a company whose target demographic encompasses a wide array of young urbanites with diverse tastes in world

<sup>61</sup> Nikki J.Y Lee, "Localized Globalization," 50-51

<sup>62</sup> Sonia Kil, "South Korea's Leading Exhibitor Poised to Boycott Netflix's *Okja*," *Variety*, July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2017, <https://variety.com/2017/digital/asia/korea-cgv-may-boycott-netflix-okja-1202451714/>

<sup>63</sup> Jungyŏng Kŭm, "The *Okja* Effect: Netflix Users Increase Twofold." [in Korean] *Media Korea*, July 18th, 2017, <http://m.mediatoday.co.kr/?mod=news&act=articleView&idxno=137942#Redyho>

cinema.”(243) But the film’s Netflix release also sends a pointed message about the languages of global cinema and the perfunctory anglocentrism that often dictates the release trajectories of international films. Netflix has been instrumental in reorganizing the transnational flows of popular film and television along the axes of language since its introduction of VOD services in 2007.<sup>64</sup> At present, the streaming platform offers filmic content from twenty-one different national contexts, twenty-six different languages, and boasts viewers in 190 countries worldwide. When a survey conducted by the company in 2014 found that a high percentage of American viewers were reluctant to watch non-Anglophone content, the company made a rather remarkable decision: rather than curate their content according to the predilections of the U.S market, the company focused on strategies to promote foreign-language content amongst its anglophone U.S audiences, from developing high-quality original content to experimenting with translation technologies, like dubbing, which were found to be more palatable to monolingual audiences.<sup>65</sup> To date, these measures have been enormously successful: U.S consumption of non-anglophone content is up, and journalists have noted how, by responding to the increased demand for a steady stream of new content, “the company is subtly exposing monolingual viewers to new languages and cultures.”<sup>66</sup>

It is perhaps fitting, then, that *Okja*’s translational politics are also organized around questions of presumptive monolingualism and anglocentrism. Unlike

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<sup>64</sup>Netflix Investors Company Profile. <https://www.netflixinvestor.com/ir-overview/profile/default.aspx>

<sup>65</sup> The survey paints a damning portrait of the US, the only holdover against an otherwise “demonstrable global appetite for shows made outside of Hollywood in languages other than English.” See Kaitie Collins, “Netflix’s plan to get everyone watching foreign-language content,” *Cnet*, November 7<sup>th</sup> 2018, <https://www.cnet.com/news/netflixs-plan-to-get-everyone-watching-foreign-language-content/>

<sup>66</sup> Zimena Larkin, “How Netflix’s increasing use of foreign language content is helping to fight xenophobia,” *The Independent*, April 14<sup>th</sup>, 2018, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/netflix-foreign-language-shows-content-narcos-cloverfield-altered-carbon-racism-a8304496.html>

*Snowpiercer*, whose eco-translational critique emerges primarily in atmospheric flourishes and moments of decalage, *Okja*'s entire plot is animated by questions of translatability. The ethical dilemma at the core of the film is, after all, not whether the production of industrial-farmed, genetically modified livestock might have some positive implications for the planet—in this, the film emphatically insists, there can be no gray area—but what role translation, and translators, might have in revealing the often invisibilized violence wrought by exploitative capitalist practices such as those favored by the global meat industry.<sup>67</sup>

This question of translational ethics first emerges in an exchange between Mija (Ahn Seo-hyeon) and K (Steven Yeun). The ALF activists have just kidnapped *Okja* from the Mirando corporation headquarters in Seoul and are hoping to send her back to the lab in New York with a secret camera in her ear, ultimately exposing the company's abuses, but this plan threatens to fall through when Mija hijacks their escape truck and begs them to set *Okja* free. Listening to Mija's words through K, the group's interpreter, ALF leader Jay (Paul Dano) implores Mija to consider letting them go through with their plan but insists that they will not continue without her consent, per the ethical credo of the organization. But when K hears Mija's response to this proposition—"I want to go back to the mountains with *Okja*," she says—he baldly lies and tells the group that she agrees, much to their delight. Though Mija immediately senses that something is amiss—that the cheers and celebratory shouts she is witnessing do not square with her response—she lacks the language ability to prevent them from leaving and can only look on as the activists abandon her and *Okja* on the truck, bound for uncertain futures in New

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<sup>67</sup> Timothy Pachirat's book, *Every Twelve Seconds: Industrialized Slaughter and the Politics of Sight* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2011) offers a bracing look at the ways in which the production and consumption of industrially-farmed meat is sustained by an optics of invisibility.

York City.

It is a layered lie, and one that will come back to haunt K over the course of the film. Though this mistranslation facilitates the successful completion of the mission, K's transgression—to which he ultimately confesses—prefigures his expulsion from the ALF. Adding insult to injury, he is viciously beaten by Jay, who tells him that "translation is sacred" and that his lie dishonors the legacy of ALF activists who have come before him. On one level, what this scene underscores is how deeply-rooted the presumption of fidelity is, particularly when translating into English.<sup>68</sup> The activists, after all, do not raise an objection to K's translation, even when it provokes a distressed reaction from Mija on the truck; the (mis)translation only emerges as unjustifiable when it is given verbal confirmation. This scene also suggests that there is a kind of violence that necessarily attends translation work—a point registered through the absurd spectacle of a "nonviolent" organization brutally disciplining a translator, but also in the gendered and cultural implications of K's refusal to translate faithfully. K's mistranslation may have "dishonored the ALF," as Jay puts it, but the more egregious violation is arguably how he places his own juvenile desires ("this is the coolest mission ever," he says at one point) over Mija and Okja's psychological and bodily safety.<sup>69</sup> That K ultimately confesses to this mistranslation, then, calls attention to the critical tendency to overlook translational bias—that problematic Lawrence Venuti describes as the "translator's invisibility."<sup>70</sup> Read this way, the confession itself emerges as a kind of *aberrant translation*—a

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<sup>68</sup> See Gayatri Spivak, "Translating into English," in *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, eds. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> It's worth noting here that Okja is ultimately subjected to a forced breeding in the New York laboratory (and not, as the activists originally suspected, invasive tests). While a full reading of the *Okja's* sex politics is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth emphasizing that the violence generated by this particular instance of mistranslation is undeniably gendered.

<sup>70</sup> "The translator's invisibility is ... a weird self-annihilation, a way of conceiving and practicing translation that undoubtedly reinforces its marginal status in British and American [Anglophone] cultures." *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 7

translational utterance that self-consciously acknowledges the highly subjective and politically inflected choices that undergird translation work, and the violent consequences that can follow from these subjective choices.<sup>71</sup>

Aberrant translation in *Okja* is tied not only to bilingualism but to K—and actor Steven Yeun’s—identities as Korean-American. If the film’s translational politics work, on one level, to make an anglophone audience aware of the ideological work of translation, they likewise interpellate a multilingual, or other-than-English, audience into their critique. Consider, for example, K’s parting words to Mija after his first translational lie. While the English subtitle to this line (fig 1) reads one way (“Mija! Try learning English! It opens new doors!”), Korean speakers instead hear a humorous, and intimate, moment of introduction across cultural lines, with K revealing his real (Korean) name to the girl (“Mija! Also, my name is Gu Soon-beom!”) (fig.2).<sup>72</sup> But it is bilingual speakers who recognize the payoff of this scene: what initially appears as a patronizing rebuke to learn English—a common refrain in Korea and, as often, Asian-America—is in fact a sly confirmation of the opposite: to know languages other than English opens doors too.

The goal here is not to “master” a language in order to be in on the joke at the heart of the film—mastery, after all, having roots in the very exploitative structures *Okja* endeavors to critique—but rather to approach learning other languages and cultures with sincerity and a willingness to make mistakes. Jay’s apology to Mija via bilingual cue cards

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<sup>71</sup> My idea of the aberrant translation shares some similarities with the idea of “abusive translation,” a term coined by Philip E. Lewis and which Abe Mark Nornes theorizes at length in his book *Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007). The difference is that, where abusive translations locate “the strength of a translation in its abuses”—as a property of the language system(s) in question—aberrant translation centers the translator-figure. See *Cinema Babel*, 176.

<sup>72</sup> E.Alex Jung observes: “there’s an added layer of comedy to the name itself, which has the whiff of the old country about it: “Koo Soon-bum” is sort of like a white man saying his name is “Buford Attaway.” “Did You Catch the Translation Joke in *Okja*?”, *Slate*, June 30<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://slate.com/culture/2017/06/there-s-a-translation-joke-for-korean-americans-in-the-subtitles-of-okja.html>

towards the end of the film is an example of this kind of earnestness; it is also, I venture, what makes Steven Yeun's performance as K, a character caught between different linguistic and cultural worlds, so compelling. Since his departure from the massive popular AMC serial *The Walking Dead* in 2016, Yeun has increasingly turned to roles set in or about Korea, culminating in his recent Korean-language performance as "Ben" in Lee Chang-dong's critically acclaimed film *Burning*. Where K is a bumbling Korean speaker (Yeun admits that he exaggerated his pronunciation for the film) Ben speaks in fluid, sophisticated prose that belies the amount of work Yeun put into the role; his foreignness registered largely in aesthetic or sartorial touches.<sup>73</sup> Taken together, these performances demonstrate two key assumptions about translation and legibility that undergird notions of Asian/American identity in transpacific cultural productions. The first is the presumption of fluency; the idea that the Asian/American subject will either be able to circulate, unimpeded, in the cultural and national contexts they straddle, or else be registered as a perpetual foreigner, not quite comfortable in either context. The second concerns fidelity, the idea that this presumed cultural and linguistic fluency can be mobilized in service of an ideological or grand national goal, and that the Asian/American subject—acting as translator—must ultimately pledge allegiance to one of these national or linguistic identities.

What *Okja* ultimately suggests, both through its production trajectory and thematic concerns, is that translations modeled on such binary formations are not a viable (or sustainable) option for the future. While one might read the reemergence of Yeun's K at the close of the film, arm newly-outfitted with a tattoo of Jay's chastising words, as a

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<sup>73</sup> Kristen Yoonsoo Kim, "Steven Yeun's Smile Will Fool You," *The Ringer*, October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2018, <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2018/10/23/18014116/steven-yeun-burning-lee-chang-dong-korean-film>

repentant ending that reinscribes the importance of translational fidelity in service of an anglophone majority, a closer look at the tattoo's wording (fig.3) proves instructive. The tattoo is, in fact, a subtle mistranslation of Jay's claim, one that moves away from a kind of singular, moralizing rightness ("translation *is* sacred") to a more capacious, plural vision of what translation can do ("translations *are* sacred"). By embracing aberrant translation in a film about environmental untenability, Bong makes a claim about the urgency of translation in our particular historical moment, and the importance of forging connections—however messily or imperfectly—across cultures, nations, languages, and even species. Keeping this idea of aberrant translation in mind, I move now to a consideration of Ruth Ozeki's 2013 novel, *A Tale for the Time Being*. Like *Snowpiercer* and *Okja*, *A Tale for the Time Being* weaves together themes of environmentality, translation, and violence in a transpacific frame, while questioning who gets to produce—or speak—an authoritative translation. My focus in this chapter is on what I am calling the novel's translational form, which I suggest has profound implications for transnational Asian American studies: not only in reorienting the field beyond its continental US and anglocentric bounds, but by drawing our attention to the national, racial, and gendered subjectivities that have historically been written out of such framings. Applying this translational approach to the divergent accounts of historical disaster in the novel, I argue that, by highlighting the untranslatable or unassimilable elements of these historically marginalized narratives, Ozeki eschews cohesion and purity politics for a mode of empathic reading structured around "not knowing."



Fig. 1: K's parting words to Mija—the still shows the English subtitle that plays over spoken Korean.



Fig. 2: A Korean-language subtitle that matches K's actual line: "my name is Gu Seon-beom."



Fig.3: K's "translations are sacred" tattoo at the end of the film.

## Chapter Two: Translational Form in Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being*

I'm interested in what drops out of history, or what gets dropped. I'm interested in where the holes are.

– Ruth Ozeki, “A Conversation with Ruth Ozeki”

In the years since the publication of her first novel *My Year of Meats* in 1999, Ruth Ozeki's work has garnered considerable attention from scholars working in Asian American literary studies and the environmental humanities alike. Often drawing inventive connections between Asian American racialization and ecological crisis—*My Year of Meats* through the global meat industry, *All Over Creation* (2003) through the use of GMOs—Ozeki's novels explore these interconnections through their transnational, rather than national or local, articulations. Her recent novel *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013), however, is a departure of sorts from these earlier works. While still concerned with Asian American environmental entanglements in a transnational frame, the novel features a more expansive temporal and geographic scope, one that spans the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and constellates Japan, Canada, and the United States. The transnational narratives the novel tells are likewise marked by a move away from the investigative, muckraking style of her earlier works towards what Canadian literature scholar Guy Beauregard calls, in his reading of the novel, a logic of “not knowing.”<sup>74</sup> In a 2013 interview, Ozeki implicitly attributes this shift to an interest in agnotology, a field of study that examines how doubt and ignorance spread via inaccurate or misleading scientific data. Agnotology, she suggests, is a useful analytic for charting the ways in which history gets codified and transmitted generationally, and how it travels (or does

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<sup>74</sup> Guy Beauregard, “On Not Knowing: A Tale for the Time Being and the Politics of Imagining Lives after March 11,” *Canadian Literature* no. 227 (2015), 96–112.

not) across linguistic lines. In approaching the project of history writing, Ozeki says, “it seems important [to me] to leave the gaps and holes, rather than trying to fill them in.”<sup>75</sup>

In this chapter, I argue that *A Tale for the Time Being* offers a new paradigm for transnational scholarship, one which places translation and its attendant “gaps and holes” squarely at the heart of its critique. The framing of the transnational *through* the practice of interlingual translation—what I am calling the novel’s transnational form—has important implications for the field of transnational criticism. It encourages, firstly, an expansion of the field beyond its continental US and anglocentric bounds.<sup>76</sup> While growing interest in transnationalism<sup>77</sup>—broadly, the movement of people, capital, and ideas across geographic and linguistic borders borne out through the interwoven processes of globalization, decolonization, and civil rights movements—has generated a rich body of work on multilingualism, bilingualism, and language hybridity in American literature, there has been a relative dearth of criticism that discusses interlingual translation in tandem with the monolingual tendencies of the field.<sup>78</sup> How do we account for this fact? A clue can be found in Eric Hayot’s assertion that, “despite the injunctions

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<sup>75</sup> “A Conversation with Ruth Ozeki.” *Penguin Books*, 2013. <http://www.ruthozeki.com/writing-film/time-being/read/>

<sup>76</sup> Other examples of this geographic and linguistic boundary-shifting in the Asian American literary tradition include Karen Tei Yamashita’s Brazil fiction, particularly the translingual (Japanese / Portuguese / English) *Circle K Cycles* (2001), Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee* (1982) and Don Mee Choi’s *Hardly War* (2016).

<sup>77</sup> For a more capacious history of the term “transnationalism” and its particular usages and deployments within American (literary) studies, see Paul Jay’s 2014 book, *Global Matters: the Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2010), as well as *Re-Framing the Transnational Turn in American Studies* (Pease et. al, Dartmouth: Dartmouth University Press, 2011). In Asian American literary studies, the signal text is Lim et al.’s *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

<sup>78</sup> I would underscore Brent Edwards’ *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003) and Yunte Huang’s work—*Transpacific Imaginations: History, Literature, Counterpoetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008)—as important exceptions here. Though the diasporic subjects and periods they engage are widely divergent—Edwards studies black diasporic entanglements with the francophone world during the Harlem Renaissance, while Huang traces a much longer history of Asian / American transpacific contact that stretches from the mid-19th century into the twentieth—both scholars emphasize the importance of translation practice in shaping the diasporic communities they study.

of postcolonial theory and its successors, the prestige of English and its transnational power have insulated traditional fields against the need (or responsibility) to learn other places and languages.”<sup>79</sup> The proliferation of interest in theorizing the global and transnational has been coeval with the enforcement of English as the lingua franca of authoritative criticism, a fact that critics who consider their work to be transnational are wont to admit. There is a tendency in transnational criticism to glorify crosslingual exchange while obscuring, at the same time, the reliance of these encounters on the processes of translation and the primacy of English.<sup>80</sup> The ability to carry out research in other languages is, after all, generally not reflective of one’s ability to engage meaningfully in that language. Gayatri Spivak likens this dynamic to that of entering a house: “The translator must not only make an attempt to grasp the presuppositions of an author but also, and of course, inhabit, even if on loan, the many mansions, and many levels of the host language,” she writes, and “[the ability to read in the host language] is to only have gained entry into the outer room, right by the front gate.”<sup>81</sup>

In drawing attention to the often myopic anglocentrism that pervades the field, I do not wish to denigrate the undeniably important work of crosslingual critique. One of transnationalism’s strengths as a critical approach is, after all, its mandate to put into practice what it preaches by moving across borders, networking, and engaging with scholars and texts in other languages.<sup>82</sup> My aim, rather, is to emphasize the peculiar

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<sup>79</sup> Eric Hayot, “The Asian Turns,” *PMLA* 124, no. 3 (2009), 908.

<sup>80</sup> Most internal conferences attended by American academics will be conducted in English, which means that—for the majority of the time, assuming the American academic is a native speaker of English—the international Academic is required to speak in their second (third, fourth) language in order to facilitate this “international exchange.”

<sup>81</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Translating into English.” *Nation, Language, and the Ethics of Translation*, eds. Sandra Bermann and Michael Wood, (Princeton University Press: 2005), 95

<sup>82</sup> Shelley Fisher Fishkin, “Crossroads of Cultures: the Transnational Turn in American Studies - Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, November 12, 2004,” *American Quarterly* 57, no.1 (2005), 41. In her presidential address to the American Studies Association in 2004, Shelley Fisher Fishkin emphasized the importance of practicing transnationalism, rather than simply paying lip service

invisibility of interlingual translation in these transnational exchanges, and to make a case for reading *for* translation as an important, and as yet underexplored, avenue for transnational criticism. With the rise of “world literature,” easy access to foreign language and “translation technology” resources on the internet, and a rapidly-growing body of translated literature from underrepresented language groups, transnational critics must begin to address the complicated power dynamics that undergird interlingual translation, and particularly translation into English.<sup>83</sup> To do this, we must strive to produce scholarship that is attentive to what translation elides, omits, or misconstrues, and consider the political shape of those absences and distortions.

Recent academic and pop-cultural writing is increasingly marked by a (re)turn to questions of empathy, and particularly the role that empathic thinking ought to play in our increasingly globalized and digitally-connected twenty-first century.<sup>84</sup> Within literary studies, this turn carries a distinct set of implications: as David Palumbo-Liu notes, “the notion that literature should mobilize (or even instantiate) empathy for others and enhance our ethical capabilities is rooted in the modern period, wherein ‘otherness,’ while certainly increasingly present, was not nearly as immediately, insistently, and intensely pressing itself into the here and now of everyday social, cultural, and political

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to it: “All of these efforts will be unnecessarily limited unless we also manage to change the culture of the profession. U.S.-based scholars have to engage with scholarship published outside the United States, and we need to require our students to do the same. We need to encourage them to seek out American studies research in the language in which they have satisfied their language requirement, and we need to reward students who make good use of foreign- language sources in their research. We also need to seek opportunities to interact with scholars outside the United States in person. Exchanges at conferences can be incubators for collaborative research projects, publications, and courses.”

<sup>83</sup> See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013).

“World literature,” much like “transnationalism,” is a contested term; as a critical approach to literary study, it refers to a kind of “de-provincialization of the canon” (Apter 2) and encourages reading textual pairings across wide geographic, linguistic, temporal divides. I attend to some of the frictions between “world literature” and translation studies elsewhere in this essay.

<sup>84</sup> Jeremy Rifkin’s *The Empathic Civilization: the Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2009) and Leslie Jamison’s *The Empathy Exams* (Minnesota: Graywolf Press, 2014) are the pop-cultural texts perhaps most representative of this “empathic turn.”

life” as it is in the twenty-first century (2). There is an incommensurability, in other words, between an earlier twentieth-century Western understanding of empathy as “stepping into someone else’s shoes” and the massive influx of otherness that globalization and late capitalism have seen in North America. This version of empathy relies, covertly and not-so-covertly, on a logic of similarity that requires a flattening of difference in order to work. In order to push literary conversations about empathy beyond this self-centered paradigm, Palumbo-Liu insists that scholars of contemporary literature move away from questions of whether or not they “get” literature written by national, racial, and gendered others and consider, instead, how literature itself “engenders a space for imagining *our relation to others* and thinking through why and how that relation exists, historically, politically, ideologically.”<sup>85</sup>

My reading of translation in *A Tale by the Time Being* is informed by this understanding of empathy as a relational structure with a distinct shape and form. In this way, my critique dovetails with current debates in world literature and translation studies around issues of “translatability,” which revolve around an essentially empathic question: how, in an era of “born translated” literature<sup>86</sup> and borderless accessibility afforded by the internet, does one remain attentive to levels of difference across languages? Emily Apter has suggested that prioritizing untranslatability, mistranslation,

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<sup>85</sup> Palumbo-Liu, David. *The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012), 14.

<sup>86</sup> Rebecca Walkowitz describes “born translated” literature as literature “written *for translation*, in the hopes of being translated, but . . . also often written *as translations*, pretending to take place in a language other than the one in which they have, in fact, been composed. Sometimes they present themselves as fake or fictional editions: subsequent versions (in English) of an original text (in some other language), which doesn’t really exist. Pointing backward as well as forward, they present translation as a spur to literary invention, including their own.” Walkowitz, *Born Translated: the Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 4. Though some of the translational dynamics I discuss in relation to Ozeki—particularly around strategic interlingual translation—resonate with Walkowitz’ concept of the born-translated novel, her book focuses more on the ways in which translation shapes the circulation and production of these texts. My primary interest, by contrast, lies in outlining the ways in which the translational *as* a critical form dilates space for imagining new transnational connections and rethinking historical ones.

and moments of translational failure can help move world literature scholars away from a “reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and suitability, or toward the celebration of ‘nationally’ and ‘ethnically’ branded differences that have long been niche-marketed as commercial identities,” and circumvent the “translation assumption” that undergirds most work in this field.<sup>87</sup> While a similar reverence for the untranslatable is at work in *A Tale for the Time Being*—with its focus on what “drops out” of historical translations—the novel also reframes untranslatability in terms of its positive capabilities. By privileging the moments of generative possibility that inhere in the untranslatable, Ozeki joins the ranks of scholars and translators who have been trying to advocate for “translation in the affirmative.”<sup>88</sup> Through an exploration of the dynamic, messy, and always-partial work of translation, *A Tale for the Time Being* empathically reimagines political alliances across national and subjective lines—Japan and America; Asian/American—while still insisting on the importance of these discrete traditions.

Throughout this chapter, I use the term “translation” to refer to two distinct yet interrelated processes: the movement from one language system to another—generally referred to as “interlingual translation”—as well the act of translating history, which is related to, but distinct from, cultural translation. My reading of *A Tale for the Time Being*’s translational form is twofold. I begin by considering the import of this formal intervention to the field of Asian American literary studies and argue that, by framing transpacific encounters and exchanges as translation work, Ozeki undoes assumptions

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<sup>87</sup> Apter, Emily. *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), 3.

<sup>88</sup> Susan Gillman, “Translation as History / History as Failure,” *American Literary History* 29, no.3 (2017), 593. In a recent review article, Susan Gillman calls attention to the “black cloud that some see in the tendency of translation studies today to focus on the *un-* and the *mis-*.” She cites a recent (2017) MLA panel, “Translation in the Affirmative,” which sought to “provide a counterweight to the recent focus on ‘untranslatability’ [by] highlight[ing] examples of translation scholarship that are grounded in the rhetoric of possibility,” as a sign of a burgeoning movement in the field to reframe (un)translatability in terms of its positive potential (rather than its restricting qualities).

about “natural” Asian American subjectivity while calling attention to forgotten sites of World War Two trauma. I then apply this translational framework to the divergent accounts of history in the novel, and suggest that—by emphasizing what is absent from these narratives—Ozeki offers a new model of empathic reading, one that does not attempt to draw parallels between differently situated individuals and histories, but rather emphasizes the importance of respecting the limits of knowability when tracing these historical entanglements.

### Translational Form and the Shifting Bounds of Asian American Subjectivity

Because Asian racialization in the United States is so often tied to language and the imperative to speak English, Christopher Lee has suggested that there is a logic of translation always-already at work in Asian American literature—if not explicitly in the form of interlingual translation, through acts of cultural translation that entail “negotiat[ing the] expectations and demands” of multiple cultures.<sup>89</sup> Typically, acts of interlingual translation in Asian American literature take three forms. They can serve as a marker of a character’s cultural and linguistic liminality or malleability (Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*); they also serve as the means through which Asian American characters can gain acceptance in “mainstream” US society (Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*). They can also be used to emphasize what Viet Nguyen calls the “bad subject” of Asian American literature, where the refusal to translate—or purposeful mistranslation—becomes a radical way of resisting homogenizing narratives about Asian

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<sup>89</sup> Christopher Lee, “The Writing of Translation,” 130.

American subjectivity, culture, and history.<sup>90</sup> Suki Kim's novel *The Interpreter*, as well as Don Mee Choi's recent poetry collection *Hardly War*, are but two examples of this genre.

Though *A Tale for the Time Being* resembles this last group in its subversive spirit and experimental form, it deviates from it in important ways as well. Rather than refuse to translate outright, the novel—through its multilingual, fragmentary, and achronological structure—asks that the reader do the work of consulting the elaborate footnotes and appendices in the book, which provide crucial historical and cultural context for the narrative. Among other things, the footnotes are used to provide definitions of Japanese terms, often calling attention to the ways in which kanji does (or does not) translate into English. In this way, the text interpellates its reader into the position of a translator, calling attention to the gaps and absences that underpin translations of history and which are typically glossed over in a so-called “authoritative account” of history.

Translation in *A Tale for the Time Being*—in both its structural and thematic iterations—belongs to the “host of marginalized poetic / historiographical practices” that Yunte Huang calls “counterpoetics.” These writerly practices, he writes, reject historical master narratives and “move instead toward the enactment of poetic imagination as a means to alter memory and invoke minority survival in the deadly space between competing national, imperial interests and between authoritative regimes of epistemology serving those interests.”<sup>91</sup> Throughout the novel, translational

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<sup>90</sup> In *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), Viet Nguyen examines how the figure of the “bad (Asian American) subject” developed in contradiction to the “model minority” stereotype and became the privileged figure of critique for Asian American literary scholars (*Race and Resistance*, 7).

<sup>91</sup> Huang, *Transpacific Imaginations*, 5

counterpoetics assume a variety of textual forms, from book fragments and journal articles to text messages, blog posts, and email correspondences. Of these, the diary emerges as particularly important: this confessional mode enables Ozeki to blur the distinction between fiction and reality, while emphasizing the subversive potential that these personal and subjective forms of writing carry. There are two diaries in the novel—one dating from the 1940s, one written in the more recent past—and both work in tandem to show the long hauntings of the Second World War, paying particular attention to the ways in which it has shaped the experiences of subjects geographically and temporally removed from the historical “sites” of this atrocity. They function, in other words, as repositories for as-yet untranslated narratives about the war, and their status as objects requiring work to understand undoes the fantasy of translations as unmediated and objective histories, presenting them rather as texts that are acted on at multiple junctures and by multiple sources.

*A Tale for the Time Being* begins with the discovery of the more contemporary diary, written by a young Japanese schoolgirl named Naoko (“Nao”) Yasutani. The diary, tucked inside the aforementioned Hello Kitty lunchbox, is discovered on a deserted beach in Whaletown, British Columbia by a woman named “Ruth.” Ruth, who serves as the present-day narrator of the novel, shares many overt similarities with Ozeki, including place of residence, occupation, biracial identity, partner’s name, and occupation. This gesture—a departure for Ozeki—works to reframe translations as the culmination of an individual translator’s intellectual and aesthetic choices, rather than an “objective” transcription of facts from one linguistic and historical context to another. Translation, like the much more transparently personal forms of writing that the novel treats, is here a fraught and subjective process. Writing herself into the novel as reader, writer, and translator of this transpacific text thus allows Ozeki to explicitly frame *A Tale for the Time*

*Being* as a counterpoetic work, one invested in troubling dominant national histories about the United States and Japan.

The discovery of Nao's diary serves as the catalyst for the narrative itself, which unfolds as the imagined correspondence between Ruth and the young girl. Through shared acts of reading and writing, both characters give expression to a host of subjectivities ordinarily elided in history writings or transnational accounts of the Japanese diaspora. Ozeki does this by refusing to naturalize the communion between these differently situated Japanese / American women and by underscoring their divergent relationships to both Japan and the Japanese language. As a biracial Japanese American who majored in classical Japanese literature and lived in Japan as a university student, Ruth initially appears the ideal recipient for Nao's diary, the only person in Whaletown who could ostensibly decipher the text. Her experience of reading the diary, however, results not in a kind of instant transpacific kinship with the girl Nao, but in a sense of alienation and estrangement from a culture she thought she had a "decent grasp of."<sup>92</sup> Overwhelmed by the girl's childish handwriting and hyper-contemporary language, and admitting that she is "only vaguely familiar with Japanese pop culture," Ruth eventually gives up on trying to read the text organically, and finds herself "logging on to the Internet to investigate and verify the girl's references, and before long, she had dragged out her old kanji dictionary, and was translating and annotating and scribbling notes about Akiba and maid cafes, otaku and hentai."<sup>93</sup> The "older and more . . . historically important" letters that arrive with the Hello Kitty lunchbox—from Nao's great-uncle Haruki #1<sup>94</sup>—are likewise too sophisticated and advanced for Ruth to read,

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<sup>92</sup> Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 29

<sup>93</sup> Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*, 29

<sup>94</sup> Ozeki, 33. Nao's father is her great-uncle's namesake. Throughout the novel, Ozeki refers to these men as Haruki #2 and #1, respectively.

despite her background in Japanese classics, and require her to visit a Japanese expatriate in a neighboring town to help with the translation.

Thus, despite a presumptive intimacy and familiarity with Japanese, Ruth is forced to approach Nao's diary as a translator would, consulting dictionaries, collaborating with native informants, and working her way through the narrative in a halting and hesitant way. These interruptions and false starts deflate the idea of the perfect translation—the idea that the text will “carry over” and find an ideal audience who will grasp its full significance. For Ruth, reading this diary is neither an organic nor easy process. It is, rather, a prolonged and laborious project, one that exposes the contradictions in her own self-constitution as Japanese diasporic subject.

Nao is depicted as having a similarly strained relationship to the Japanese language, a fact that renders her decision to write her diary in Japanese all the more strange and pointed. Born in Japan to Japanese parents, Nao spent her childhood years in Sunnyvale, California, where her father, Haruki “Harry” Yasutani worked as a computer programmer in Silicon Valley. The family is forced to move back to Japan when the dot-com bubble bursts and forces her father out of a job. Though this forced repatriation is devastating for the Yasutanis, Nao notes that for her parents, who still “identified as Japanese and . . . spoke the language fluently,” the change was much less traumatic. She, by contrast, “identifie[s] as American” and speaks rudimentary Japanese, “limited to basic, daily-life stuff like where's my allowance, and pass the jam, and Oh please please please don't make me leave Sunnyvale” (43). Too poor to attend a special school for *kikokushijo* (repatriated children), Nao is forced to repeat half of the eighth grade to compensate for her language skills. Her linguistic deficiencies also make her a target for brutal bullying or *ijime* at her new school; her classmates call her a *gaijin* (foreigner) and a *bimbo* (poor person) and hurl insults at her using idiomatic English

gleaned from rap videos. In this way, Ozeki resists the transpacific narrative that figures English fluency as a form of cultural capital by framing Nao's ostracization as a direct result of her facility in English. By writing her diary *in* Japanese—the language at the root of her social ostracization—Nao linguistically transmits the stilted feeling of being “out of place,” a feeling that is mirrored in Ruth's experience of reading the diary with the aid of a dictionary. The transpacific connection between Ruth and Nao, Ozeki suggests, emerges not out of some romanticized and seamlessly transferred sense of a shared Japanese identity, but rather through a shared sense of being estranged from the very language that brings them together.

This shared sense of being “out of place” is not merely linguistic, but reverberates in the realms of culture and geography as well. If Nao struggles with the Japanese language, she nevertheless exhibits a keen understanding of Japanese culture—a cultural fluency—in her diary. She knows, for instance, that in Japan the outcome of your high school entrance examinations affects the trajectory of your entire life and beyond, from the university you attend to whether or not you can afford a proper funeral, and whether or not “you'll become a hungry vengeful ghost, fated to haunt the living on account of all of your unsatisfied desires.”<sup>95</sup> Though she recognizes the terms of belonging within Japanese society and translates them clearly for the reader of her diary, she is unable to square these terms of belonging with her own lived experience, which is indelibly American. Nao describes herself as “already a vengeful ghost, haunting the living, so it didn't really matter if I lived or died, and anyway, I grew up in Sunnyvale, so I have a different attitude about these kinds of things. In my heart, I'm American, and I believe I have a free will and can take charge of my own destiny.”<sup>96</sup> Ozeki suggests that Nao's

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<sup>95</sup> Ozeki, 129

<sup>96</sup> Ozeki, 130

refusal to ascribe to these terms of belonging is the catalyst for her own social death, the pretend funeral held for her by her classmates after weeks of ostracization or “zen-in Shikato.”<sup>97</sup> She is rendered ghostly not because she does not understand the culture she finds herself in, but rather because there is a gap—a kind of asymptotic (mis)alignment—between these imperatives for belonging and her own value system, which she understands to be an American one.

In this haunted space of not-belonging between the US and Japan that the novel sketches out, Canada occupies a particularly important position. Nao’s father, recognizing his daughter’s sense of alienation in Japan, imagines Canada as an idealized haven, a kind of liminal space where Nao can exercise her Americanized “free will” without having to contend with the social scrutiny she experiences in Japan. Of this, Nao writes: “He wants me to go to Canada. He’s got this thing about Canada. He says it’s like America only with health care and no guns, and you can live up to your potential there and not have to worry about what society thinks or about getting sick or getting shot.”<sup>98</sup> By staging *A Tale for the Time Being*’s Asian American narrative as a correspondence between subjects in Japan and Canada, Ozeki highlights some important assumptions about Canada in transpacific and Asian American studies discourse, where it is too-often conflated with the United States or else elided altogether.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Ozeki, 99.

<sup>98</sup> Ozeki, 42. There is potential to do a reading of comparative racialization that reads the absent / present black figure here (the racialized target for being shot in the US) against the absent / presence of First Nations in Whaletown. Iyko Day’s book *Alien Capital: Asian Racism and the Logic of Settler Colonial Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016) employs such an approach in its comparative theorization of Asian American / Asian Canadian racialization. Guy Beauregard’s essay on *A Tale for the time Being* reads the spectral presence of the Sliammon First Nations in the novel but does not employ such a comparative approach.

<sup>99</sup> For more on the conflation between Canada and the United States within the context of American studies, see Maggie Bowers, “For East, Look North: Cross-Border Comparisons and the Future of North American Asian American Studies (*Transnational, National, and Personal Voices: New Perspectives on Asian American and Asian Diasporic Women Writers*, 2004), as well as Eleanor Ty’s writing, especially her co-edited collection with Christyl Verduyn, *Asian Canadian Writing Beyond Autoethnography* (2008).

The fantasy of Canada as a kind of liberal utopia, encompassing only the best parts of American culture (and none of the worst) is disrupted by Ruth's character, a New York City transplant, who recognizes her rural British Columbia environment as a site of violent transpacific contact. When she learns, for instance, of a house formerly called "Jap ranch" on the outskirts of the island—the home had belonged to a Japanese family who had to sell it during the war—Ruth continues to refer to the home by its original name, despite the great discomfort this causes her Anglo-Canadian neighbors. "Once Ruth heard the nickname," Ozeki writes, "she stubbornly persisted in using it. As a person of Japanese ancestry, she said, she had the right, and it was important not to let New Age correctness erase the history of the island."<sup>100</sup> Despite the fact that Canada interned a substantial number of Japanese citizens during the Second World War, most accounts of the internment tend to focus on the US context.<sup>101</sup> By frequently calling attention to this history while in conversation with people on the island, Ruth refuses to adhere to the rules of polite forgetting that govern the social space she lives in; like Nao, she recognizes and translates the imperatives of cultural belonging, but declines to abide by them. She and Nao are thus aligned in their roles as apt yet unwilling cultural translators, who—by way of inhabiting a spectral space "in between" cultures and languages—are uniquely situated to critique the contradictions undergirding Canadian and Japanese societies.

Ruth and Nao's respective migrations—between Canada and the US, and from Japan to the US and back again—also complicate a dominant narrative of Asian American immigration in the US academic context, one that privileges a singular, resistant

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<sup>100</sup> Ozeki, 32

<sup>101</sup> See Iyko Day, "Alien Intimacies," *Amerasia Journal* 36, no. 2 (2010): 107–124. It is necessary to mention Iyko Day's scholarship again as an important exception; this time, her essay "Alien Intimacies: the Coloniality of Japanese Internment in Australia, Canada, and the U.S.," which considers Japanese internment as a global phenomenon using a settler colonial framework. Other exceptions include the abundant scholarship on Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, largely from the late twentieth-century.

immigrant subject in its account of transnational flows between the United States and Asia. Ozeki's protagonists are, rather, examples of what Weiqiang Lin and Brenda Yeoh call the "forgotten migrants" of Western anglophone transnationalist discourse: upwardly mobile Asian American subjects who are able to act as cultural translators precisely because of their relative financial and educational privilege.<sup>102</sup> These "forgotten migrants" are a variation on an earlier twentieth-century diasporic figure that Elaine Kim famously termed "ambassador[s] of good will"—wealthy and well-educated Asians who attempted to use their cultural and linguistic bilingualism to "bridge the gap between East and West and plead for tolerance by making ... highly euphemistic observations about the West on the one hand while explaining Asia in idealized terms on the other."<sup>103</sup> The central presence of such figures in Ozeki's novel emphasizes the need to rethink the geographic and temporal scope of "Asian America," particularly as we round into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Since its inception in the early 1970s, Asian American Studies has struggled to reconcile the unwieldiness of the designation, "Asian American," with the diversity of its (would-be) constituents; Shirley Geok-lin Lim has observed, in this vein, that Asian American literature—both as critical praxis and textual body—has at times emerged as "a plethora of seemingly disparate threads," all of which seem to lead to "distinctively different National origins, first languages indecipherable to other Asian Americans, and cultural signs and codes of signification unintelligible to those identified as 'the same' by census and academic disciplinary discourses."<sup>104</sup> Ruth and Nao's transnational

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<sup>102</sup> Weiqiang Lin and Brenda Yeoh, "Transpacific Studies: the View From Asia," in *Transpacific Studies: Framing an Emergent Field*, eds. Janet Hoskins and Viet Nguyen (Hawai'i: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014). Loc 1107 of 6080, Kindle edition.

<sup>103</sup> Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: an Introduction to the Writings and their Social Context* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1982), 24.

<sup>104</sup> Shirley Geok-lin Lim, John Blair Gamber, and Stephen Hong Sohn, *Transnational Asian American Literature: Sites and Transits*. Temple University Press, 2006), 2

correspondences are exemplary of the kind of subjective practices that come into view when Asian American literature is approached as a “subjectless discourse”—when one interrogates, in other words, the ethnic and geographical situatedness that the name of this field evokes.<sup>105</sup> The translational form of the novel, in highlighting Ruth and Nao’s divergent linguistic, geographic, and cultural relationships to Asian American identity, deviates from a version of western anglophone transnationalism that makes assumptions about an essential and hypostasized Asian American subject. Rather, *A Tale for the Time Being* emphasizes the ways in which Asian American identity—particularly in the globalized, digitally connected present—is a malleable and frequently changing construct, shifting and transforming as its terms and bounds are negotiated and (re)written across linguistic, geographic, and national borders.

### Translating Histories: Japan, America, and World War II

If the transpacific journey of Nao’s diary challenges a present-day narrative about transnational flows and the Japanese diaspora, then the second diary featured in the novel—belonging to her great-uncle, Haruki #1—serves to complicate Japanese and American national narratives around World War Two. It is unsurprising that, in a novel concerned precisely with the long histor(ies) of the transpacific, the Second World War—with its episodes of extraordinary violence and dramas of containment—would be a persistent and haunting presence. While most WWII novels tend, consciously or not, to privilege a single national narrative about this historical conflict, *A Tale for the Time Being* seeks to show the disparate ways in which the Second World War is memorialized along

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<sup>105</sup> Kandice Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise: on Asian Americanist Critique* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 9.

geographic, national, and linguistic lines. Ruth and Nao's collaborative translations of Haruki #1's letters and secret diary work to illuminate the great cleavage between Japanese and American accounts of the war, as well as the ways in which acts of translation shaped the archive of public memory around this event.

Haruki #1's story emerges out of Nao's attempts to explain her grandmother Jiko's conversion to Zen Buddhism. Jiko became a nun, Nao notes, after losing her son Haruki, a kamikaze pilot, in the war. Nao quickly stops to clarify, acknowledging that in Japan "the war" only ever means World War Two, and that she recognizes how "America is constantly fighting wars all over the place, so you've got to be more specific."<sup>106</sup> Her explication of the difference between American and Japanese conceptions of war, though lengthy, is worth quoting in full here:

Americans always call it World War II, but a lot of Japanese call it the Greater East Asian War, and actually the two countries have totally different versions of who started it and what happened. Most Americans think it was all Japan's fault, because Japan invaded China in order to steal their oil and natural resources, and America had to jump in and stop them. But a lot of Japanese believe that America started it by making all these unreasonable sanctions against Japan and cutting off oil and food, and like, ooooh, we're just a poor little island country that needs to import stuff in order to survive, etc. This theory says that America forced Japan to go to war in self-defense, and all that stuff they did in China was none of America's business to begin with. So Japan went and attacked Pearl Harbor, which a lot of Americans say was a 9/11 scenario, and then America got pissed off and declared war back. The fighting went on until America got fed up and dropped atom bombs on Japan and totally obliterated Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which most people agree was pretty harsh because they were winning by then anyway.<sup>107</sup>

This passage calls attention to two important aspects of historical memory. The first is the agential role of the nation state in manipulating the narrative around historical conflicts ("totally different versions of who started it and what happened") and in affecting the ways in which historical events are memorialized in different parts of the world. The second aspect is a generational one. The passage suggests that events as seemingly

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<sup>106</sup> Ozeki, 178

<sup>107</sup> Ozeki, 179

disparate as Pearl Harbor and 9/11—even as they are played out at different moments in time and by different geopolitical powers—can be thought of as recursive articulations of an earlier dynamic. The recursivity of these events, however, is difficult for differently-situated generations to glean. Nao recognizes her own inability to fully appreciate the exigencies of war, for example, during a conversation with Jiko. Jiko suggests that today's youth are *heiwaboke*, a Japanese term that Ozeki translates as “stupefied with peace; lit. ‘peace’ + ‘addled.’”<sup>108</sup> Nao confesses that she herself does not know “how to translate [heiwaboke], but basically it means that we’re spaced out and careless because we don’t understand about war. She says we think Japan is a peaceful nation, because we were born after the war ended and peace is all we can remember, and we like it that way, but actually our whole lives are shaped by war and the past and we should understand that.”<sup>109</sup> It is not that Nao is unable to imagine the hardships of war, but rather that she does not have the precise language to relate to it as Jiko does.

This lack of exactitude in language recalls Walter Benjamin’s suggestion that translation work—in its striving to produce an “echo of the original”—always entails a kind of loss and approximation.<sup>110</sup> Nao appears to acknowledge this when she remarks, “even though I can’t imagine how awful it was, maybe I can, just a little.”<sup>111</sup> While one might be tempted to read this instance as one of translational failure—Nao is unable, after all, to fully comprehend the historical atrocities her grandmother lived through—the approximate “just a little” offers a glimmer of hope. It gestures, firstly, towards the *liveliness* of texts—particularly historical texts—that Benjamin recognized as being key to a narrative’s translatability. The relationship between a translation and its original,

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<sup>108</sup> Ozeki, 180

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Benjamin, “The Task of the Translator,” 258.

<sup>111</sup> Ozeki, 179

Benjamin suggests, should be thought of as “a natural one, or, more specifically, a vital one. Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original—not so much from its life, but from its afterlife”<sup>112</sup> Nao’s recapitulation of Jiko’s war story, replete with her own admissions of partial understanding, thus marks the origin of the “afterlife” of this historical counternarrative.

There is a fated quality to this kind of translational act, one which gets worked out in the imaginative structure of the book. Just as Nao wonders, at various points throughout the novel, whether or not anyone will read her diary, Ruth wonders about the fate of the young girl whose story she has become engrossed in. This suggests that the power of translation inheres not so much in the accuracy of translated material or even whether a source text finds an audience.<sup>113</sup> Its power emanates, rather, from the very act of sending a text out into the world. To do this, Ozeki suggests, lays the groundwork for potentially revelatory cross-cultural and cross-lingual connections, albeit ones that sometimes take lifetimes to materialize.

One of the ways that writers have historically been able to ensure the afterlife of their work has been through the strategic deployment of interlingual translation. Writing in different languages has, Ozeki reminds us, frequently enabled authors to elude the watchful eye of the government and shirk the suppression of speech laws of oppressive political regimes. Haruki #1, for his part, leaves two records of his experience as a kamikaze pilot during the war: a series of letters, written in Japanese, that Jiko gifts to Nao; and a secret French diary that appears, in a magical realist twist, at Jiko’s funeral

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<sup>112</sup> Benjamin, 254.

<sup>113</sup> Or a translator: Benjamin, for his part, felt that linguistic translatability ought to be considered even in instances where a text proved untranslatable: “the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men [*sic*] should prove unable to translate them.” Benjamin, 254.

towards the end of the novel.<sup>114</sup> Both written documents constitute an archive of Haruki's harrowing experience as a soldier in the Japanese imperial army, although they diverge wildly in their descriptions of this experience. The Japanese letters—which later are revealed to have been censored for fear of governmental interception—use almost comically euphemistic language to describe the horrific environment at the army base: the squadron leader “F” is likened to “the brilliant French soldier the Marquis de Sade . . . [with] an ingenious mind and artist's introspection that inspires him, driving him toward some kind of unspeakable perfection.”<sup>115</sup> The secret French diary, by contrast, provides a more bracing account of the violence we might expect from a Sadeian figure: Haruki recalls an episode in which the Marquis de F--- “punched me on both sides of my face and beat me with the heel of his boot” until “the inside of my mouth was like minced meat and even the smallest sip of miso soup brought tears to my eyes, the salt in the wounds was so painful.”<sup>116</sup> In other episodes, he is beaten to the point of unconsciousness. These beatings, Haruki #1 notes, are done in the hopes of developing the army's “fighting spirit,” which enables them to carry out horrific acts of violence against their enemies.<sup>117</sup> He recounts these acts, too, in excruciating detail: the rape and mutilation of grandmothers and skewering of babies, Chinese men “hung upside down like meat over open fires . . . their burning flesh peeled from their living bodies . . . their arms danc[ing] like grilled squid legs,” and the traumatized countenance of the boy soldiers forced to carry out these acts.<sup>118</sup> These blunt descriptions of the brutality of war are notably absent from the letters, which Haruki (rightly) suspects “might be read or

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<sup>114</sup> For more on “magical realist moments,” as well as magical realism's various deployments in Asian American literature, see Lyn Di Iorio Sandin and Begona Simal's respective pieces in *Moments of Magical Realism in US Ethnic Literatures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

<sup>115</sup> Ozeki, 253

<sup>116</sup> Ozeki, 318

<sup>117</sup> Ozeki, 240

<sup>118</sup> Ozeki, 326

intercepted.”<sup>119</sup> His writing in French thus becomes a safeguard against any interference from the army and the state; an “excellent security feature,” as Benoit Lebec, who translates the French diary for Ruth, puts it.<sup>120</sup>

Like the imagined correspondences between Ruth and Nao, Haruki’s letters and diary offer a parable of translation practice, only here the emphasis is on the importance of transgenerational (rather than transnational or transcultural) collaboration. While translation across cultures can facilitate unlikely transnational alliances and connections, it is by translating across generational lines that translation’s potential to alter history comes into view. In this next section, I consider how the various forms of translation I have discussed thus far—interlingual, transcultural, transgenerational—cohere in the novel’s dual depictions of September 11<sup>th</sup> and Fukushima. By highlighting the contradictions in the national media narratives around these two catastrophes, I suggest that Ozeki offers a new approach to transnational textual production, one that stresses respect for the limits of what is knowable within a multilingual and cross-cultural context, while also emphasizing (and often reveling in) the imagined relationality that that unknowability incites. Such an approach, I argue, underscores the translation as a constitutive part of the transnational, and not—as it has sometimes been theorized—one of its subparts.

### Toward a Praxis of Empathic Reading: Fukushima and September 11th in a Global Frame

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<sup>119</sup> Ozeki, 328

<sup>120</sup> Ozeki, 226

One insight that injury affords is that there are others out there on whom my life depends,  
people I do not know and may never know.

- Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence*

You wonder about me.

I wonder about you.

- Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being*

Throughout *A Tale for the Time Being*, Ozeki calls attention to the slippages between authoritative accounts of history—those in service of a grand national narrative—and the kind of translational counterpoetics that Benjamin describes as hovering in the margins of history. This is nowhere more apparent than in the novel’s treatment of September 11th, the twenty-first century disaster that emerges as a kind of pivot point in the novel—a “sharp knife slicing through time” that “changed everything” for anyone who happened to be alive to witness it.<sup>121</sup> Tellingly, Ruth and Nao’s narrative recollections of this “American” tragedy are largely articulated outside the bounds of the continental US. This vantage point—in which “America” is geographically and ideologically decentered—serves a dual function. It reinforces, firstly, the novel’s project of dismantling narratives of American exceptionalism, while highlighting how America’s global entanglements at the national level act on the individual. In striving to offer a counternarrative to the American nationalist account of 9/11, Ruth and Nao’s recollections bear an uncanny resemblance to Haruki #1’s diaries. Both women attempt to give expression to atrocities that resist comprehensive depiction, and despite their best efforts, their accounts can only ever be partial, “echo[es] of the original.”<sup>122</sup> Given the translational context in which this critique of historical master narratives emerges, the novel models a way of interpreting written histories that encourages reading for such

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<sup>121</sup> Ozeki, 265

<sup>122</sup> Benjamin, 258

gaps and absences, and imaginatively “filling in” these spaces to imagine the “you” that exists parallel to “me”—even if that “you” inhabits a different temporality, or national and linguistic sphere. It is a reading praxis that—in its very emphasis on blank spaces and omissions—recalls Palumbo-Liu’s understanding of empathy as relational (and therefore always partial) structure.

Nao’s recollection of September 11th is marked by such a tension between national master narrative and absence. Watching the television coverage in Japan, she and her father become enraptured by the people jumping from the burning towers. These figures—and particularly the image of the Falling Man—would become an important part of the patriotic national narrative of 9/11, a symbol of courage and fortitude in the face of unthinkable evil. The highly romanticized way in which Falling Man’s death was discussed in the media mirrors the kind of language that Japanese used to describe kamikaze missions—that these pilots reflected the imperial army’s “fighting spirit,” for instance, and that there was something poetic in tying “a cloth around my forehead, branded with the rising sun, and tak[ing] to the sky.”<sup>123</sup> By offering a glimpse of the inner conflicts of the Japanese imperial soldiers through Haruki #1’s secret diary, Ozeki attempts to counter this version of events. In so doing, she works to fill in a still-extant gap in the historical and academic literature about the kamikaze, which, Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney writes, outside of Japan “is curious in terms of the inverse relationship between public interest in them as an icon of utmost Otherness, and the stark absence of serious scholarly interest in them. It is a case of exile from history, and twice at that—both inside and outside Japan.”<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Ozeki, 217

<sup>124</sup> Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney, “Betrayal by Idealism and Aesthetics: Special Attack force (Kamikaze) Pilots and their Intellectual Trajectories (Part 1),” *Anthropology Today* 20, no. 1 (2004), 221. Ohnuki-Tierney uses the standard Japanese word for kamikaze, *tokkōtai*, throughout her piece. Interestingly, though Ozeki

If *A Tale for the Time Being* tries to humanize to the historically exiled figure of the kamikaze pilot through Haruki #1's diary, it likewise asks its audience to consider how the other absent presence in the novel—the terrorist figure—might also invite an empathic reading. Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai have observed, in this vein, that the terrorist shares a “basic kinship” with a slew of other historical monsters in the American racial imaginary, all of which became “case studies, objects of ethnographies, and interesting psychological cases of degeneracy.”<sup>125</sup> While the counterhistory of the kamikaze pilots presented in Haruki #1's diary would seem to work against this dehumanizing narrative—providing, as they do, insight into the conflicted and often traumatized inner world of one such “historical monster”—the novel stops short of offering any such reading of the Islamic terrorists. In fact, Ozeki's text is marked by an almost dogged refusal to discuss the terrorists at all. And yet, the transnational critique of the September 11th attacks that the novel levies turns on this very absence: by positioning the Falling Man at the center of this historical through line between the absent terrorists and their ghostly historical predecessors, Ozeki weaves an empathic link between historical “victims” and “aggressors,” prompting a reconsideration of the relationship between the two.

The unwillingness of critics to acknowledge even the possibility of such a connection, however—either within *A Tale for the Time Being* or within the broader critical conversation around 9/11—is telling.<sup>126</sup> In his reading of the novel, Daniel McKay rightly

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relied heavily on Ohnuki-Tierney's scholarship in writing *A Tale for the Time Being*, she does not cite the above article—part of a series which attempts to draw together the figure of the kamikaze and the 9/11 terrorist.

<sup>125</sup> Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, “Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots,” *Social Text* 20, no.3 (2002), 124.

<sup>126</sup> Susan Sontag, “Tuesday, and After.” *The New Yorker*. September 24th, 2001, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2001/09/24/tuesday-and-after-talk-of-the-town>.

points to the failure of “Anglophone—specifically North American” scholars to challenge the racist depictions of Kamikaze pilots in literature.<sup>127</sup> But while he names *A Tale for the Time Being* and Kerri Sakamoto’s *One Million Hearts* as two important exceptions to this paradigm, McKay concludes his piece by raising the possibility of a Kamikaze / Islamist terrorist connection in Ozeki’s novel only to foreclose it altogether. Insisting that “parallels” between kamikaze pilots and Islamist terrorists “have yet to occur in Japanese North American fiction writing,” McKay submits that “narratives of and about kamikaze pilots are already provocative enough without reducing them to an appendage of post-9/11 politics.”<sup>128</sup> To invoke such parallelism is to misread, I think, the version of empathy at the heart of *A Tale for the Time Being*’s translational form, which leaves space for acknowledging the possibility of common ground between historical adversaries without condoning or identifying with the perpetrators of historical trauma. This version of empathy requires acknowledging the presence of these suggestive absences—acknowledging what is plainly *there*—even when it is uncomfortable. McKay’s refusal to pursue this line of questioning, by contrast, unwittingly replicates the binary logic that undergirds most of the public discourse on 9/11 (and to which he attends, in relation to national accounts of World War II, in his own piece).

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Critics who attempted to see the humanity in the 9/11 terrorists were generally met with a fierce backlash. Susan Sontag, perhaps the most famous critic accused of being unpatriotic, wrote a controversial piece in the *New Yorker* that gives a sense of the kind of empathic “unknowability” I am trying to describe here. She writes: “Where is the acknowledgment that this was not a “cowardly” attack on “civilization” or “liberty” or “humanity” or “the free world” but an attack on the world’s self-proclaimed superpower, undertaken as a consequence of specific American alliances and actions? How many citizens are aware of the ongoing American bombing of Iraq? And if the word “cowardly” is to be used, it might be more aptly applied to those who kill from beyond the range of retaliation, high in the sky, than to those willing to die themselves in order to kill others. In the matter of courage (a morally neutral virtue): whatever may be said of the perpetrators of Tuesday’s slaughter, they were not cowards.”

<sup>127</sup> Daniel McKay, “The Right Stuff: The Kamikaze Pilot in *One Hundred Million Hearts* and Ruth Ozeki’s *A Tale for the Time Being*,” *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the U.S.* 41, no. 1 (2016), 8. Though McKay repeatedly raises this important point about the cleavages between Anglophone / Japanese accounts of World War II and the Kamikaze figure, it is not clear how he understands translation in relation to this schematic.

<sup>128</sup> McKay, “The Right Stuff,” 22.

Historical psychologists have, for their part, called attention to the striking “symmetry” between both Osama Bin Laden and George Bush’s respective statements in the wake of the terrorist attacks, both of which revolve around the us / them binary; while the former construed the conflict in terms of religion and duty towards God, the latter saw it as a socio-political, and moral, issue.<sup>129</sup> What these slippages (and the critical resistance to them) emphasize, then, is the inherently translational makeup of the transnational, as well as the importance of weighing interlingual and transcultural untranslatables within any account of transnational politics. Though she does not use the language of translation per se, a similar logic is at work in Judith Butler’s assessment of the American public’s responses to the attacks in the weeks after September 11th. There was something discordant, Butler notes, in those grandiose displays of mourning and patriotism that belied an unwillingness to acknowledge how this instance of violence might be a response to a much longer history of American imperialism, expansion, and intervention abroad. If Americans wanted to consider themselves “global actors” in more than name, she writes, they would first and foremost have to “emerge from the narrative perspective of US unilateralism and, as it were, its defensive structures, to consider the ways in which [their] lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others.”<sup>130</sup> One of the ways in which we might do this, Ozeki suggests, is through the empathic engagement of non U.S-centric histories. Fukushima—and its particular illegibility within the western media landscape—thus functions as a foil for the kind of overdetermined and singular historical narratives that the novel pushes back against, and emerges as the site where *A Tale for the Time Being*’s empathic reading praxis is most clearly worked out.

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<sup>129</sup> Ivan Leudar, Victoria Marsland, and Jiri Nekvapil, “On Membership Categorization: ‘Us,’ ‘Them,’ and ‘Doing Violence’ in Political Discourse,” *Discourse and Society* 15, no. 2-3 (2004), 258.

<sup>130</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the Politics of Mourning and Violence* (New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

Unlike 9/11—which had a clearly defined (if problematically construed) “enemy” and “victim”—Fukushima, in continuing the nuclear legacies of Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, and Bhopal, has been described as a “war without an enemy,” the culmination of years of governmental mismanagement, geopolitical angst, and corporate greed.<sup>131</sup> Such a localized understanding of Fukushima, however, elides the complicated historical imbrications of U.S / Japanese geopolitical interest that *A Tale for the Time Being* traces. One cannot “read” Fukushima, Ozeki suggests, without also acknowledging Japan as the first site of a nuclear war *with* an enemy, and that the United States was the aggressor in this instance. The highly speculative ways in which Fukushima was depicted in the western media (where it was discussed at all) are reflected in Ozeki’s refusal to provide concrete details about the disaster in the novel: the tsunami, for instance, is the means by which Nao’s diary *might* have been delivered to Ruth across the Pacific, while the nuclear meltdown *might* have brought unspeakable harm to Nao’s family, though neither of these details are ever confirmed. In this way, Fukushima becomes a fitting metaphor for the histories *A Tale for the Time Being* has sought to translate: histories of trauma and violence that unfold across temporal and spatial meridians, connecting disparately situated individuals in powerful (and, often, subtle or imperceptible) ways. In encouraging us to read for such moments of uncertainty or ambiguity, Ozeki emphasizes the need to think empathically, rather than in a reactionary way, about our relationship to those whose lives are historically interwoven with our own. To fail to do this, she suggests, is ultimately to participate in the perpetuation of bad translations of history, the kind that dehumanize the most vulnerable in service of a grand national narrative.

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<sup>131</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *After Fukushima: The Equivalence of Catastrophes*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 10.

Though scientists are still unable to quantify the extent of the ecological and biological damage wrought by Fukushima, they generally agree upon two important points. The first is that Fukushima's reach extends far beyond the confines of the Japanese peninsula, comprising a scope that can properly be considered "global."<sup>132</sup> The second is that the damage from this disaster—though less immediately visible now several years on—is persistent and ongoing. Unlike 9/11—which became, as Ozeki shows us, a global "event" precisely because of its irruptive and spectacular qualities—Fukushima is an example of "slow violence," "a violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales."<sup>133</sup> As such, the transnational flows that it instantiates are more difficult to perceive, and media coverage of the event—particularly within the United States—was, unsurprisingly, found lacking.<sup>134</sup> If 9/11 was a moment in which efforts to make slow violence legible were set back by "a spectacular, immediately sensational, and instantly hyper-visible image of what constitutes a violent threat," then Ozeki's decision to structure *A Tale for the Time Being* around Fukushima would appear to privilege the opposite: moments of ecological and bodily slow violence that are less readily perceptible precisely because of their quotidian quality.<sup>135</sup> The novel's depictions of Fukushima as an environmental catastrophe that confounds representation offer a comment, I argue, on

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<sup>132</sup>See William A. Barletta et. al, "Five years after Fukushima: Insights from Current Research," *Elsevier*, March 10, 2016, <https://www.elsevier.com/connect/5-years-after-fukushima-insights-from-current-research>. This article provides a comprehensive bibliography on Fukushima research from 2011-2016, with a focus on this event's environmental and economic impact at both the global and local levels.

<sup>133</sup> Nixon, 2.

<sup>134</sup> In many ways, the advent of the internet complicates the ways in which we have traditionally "witness" such disasters; as Sharon M. Friedman notes (and Ozeki alludes to in *A Tale*), the internet made "an enormous amount of information on Fukushima available" to anyone who wanted to access it. American television coverage of the event, on the other hand, was criticized for its sensationalism (see Friedman, "Three Mile Island, Chernobyl, Fukushima," 62) or for downplaying the significance of this event in lieu of localized issues (see Landman, "What Happened to Media Coverage of Fukushima?", 2011).

<sup>135</sup> Nixon, 13.

the kinds of racialized and gendered violence that frequently “drop out” of history. In so doing, they make a case for translational counterpoetics as a political—and not merely rhetorical—survival strategy, a way to resist dominant forces that would make such violence invisible.

### Coda: On Purity

Though the tsunami is a near-constant presence in *A Tale for the Time Being*, Fukushima itself appears infrequently, the first time being nearly halfway through the novel. The city advertises itself as Japan’s “Happy Island”; a strange designation, given the locale’s dark history. Located in the Tohoku region of Japan, Fukushima was “one of the last pieces of tribal land to be taken from the indigenous Emishi, descendants of the Iomon people, who had lived there from prehistoric times until they were defeated by the Japanese Imperial Army in the eighth century.”<sup>136</sup> This history of colonialism and violence, Ozeki suggests, cannot be so easily narrativized away: as the banners strung around Fukushima’s city center pre-tsunami suggest—“Nuclear power is energy for a brighter future! The correct understanding of nuclear power leads to a better life!”—happiness in this context is interpretive, and selectively so, turning on the willful forgetting not only of the colonial violence that befell the Emishi, but also, ostensibly, the nuclear violence that irradiated Hiroshima and Nagasaki a few decades prior. Like Butler’s reframing of the 9/11 narrative that occludes America’s violent historical entanglements with the Middle East, Ozeki here renders suspect the fiction of an innocent and uncorrupted Fukushima “pre” tsunami. She also draws a through-line between this historical forgetting and the one that governs Valdes island, the “relatively benign and happy little

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<sup>136</sup> Ozeki, 141.

isle” named “for a famous Spanish conquistador” where Ruth and Oliver live, placing Fukushima within the larger global context of colonialism and violence against indigenous peoples.<sup>137</sup>

If the name “Fukushima” attempts to create rhetorical distance between Japan’s violent pasts and its optimistic vision of the future—if it attempts, in other words, to contain and bury its unsavory histories—then the 2011 nuclear disaster, which culminated in the release of over 11,500 tons of contaminated water into the Pacific Ocean, would seem to symbolize the utter impossibility of such containment.<sup>138</sup> The anxiety over contamination that emerged in the wake of Fukushima is illustrative of the ways in which a kind of purity politics—what Alexis Shotwell calls “the rhetorical or conceptual attempt to delineate and delimit the world into something separable, disentangled, and homogenous”—is always-already at work in nationalist accounts of history.<sup>139</sup> Put another way, a key feature of these writings is the minimization or disavowal of one’s implication within such historical atrocities. Within *A Tale for the Time Being*’s critique of reading-as-empathic-work, such moments of anxiety over purity signal the presence of “impure” or ethically murky events that have been excised from history. These specters of history, like the translational elisions I have explored thus far in this chapter, create meaning *through* absence, through the process of “mak[ing] their mark by being there and not being there at the same time” that Sociologist Avery Gordon describes as central to the hauntings that are “constitutive of modern life.”<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> “Japan official apologizes for dumping radioactive water into Pacific,” *CNN*, April 4<sup>th</sup>, 2011, <http://www.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/asiapcf/04/04/japan.nuclear.reactors/index.html>

<sup>139</sup> Alexis Shotwell, *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 15.

<sup>140</sup> Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting the Sociological Imagination* (Minnesota: University of

One such moment of spectral return comes at the Whaletown post office, where Ruth is queried by locals about the contents of the Hello Kitty lunchbox. A young pregnant woman (who goes by, of all things, “Purity”) expresses fear over Ruth’s findings, explaining: “I don’t want to get cancer and give birth to deformed babies.”<sup>141</sup> This anxiety over contamination, particularly as it coheres in and around the white female body and her would-be progeny, is complicated by the fact that the source of contamination is Japanese — or, more precisely, of a kind of generic “Asian” variety. The image of babies deformed by nuclear contamination might originate with Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but it is more frequently (and exactly) associated with the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam.<sup>142</sup> And while the U.S government has begun, slowly, to atone for the damage done to American veterans and their children due to dioxin exposure during the Vietnam war, they have been less willing to acknowledge the far more widespread (and ongoing) harm inflicted on the Vietnamese people as a result of Agent Orange.<sup>143</sup> The reason for this “official American reluctance,” Viet Thanh Nguyen writes,

is not [for] lack of scientific evidence. The problem is the distance between American policy makers and the Vietnamese people. Vietnamese victims are too far removed from the American public, and too reminiscent of an unpopular war. Agent Orange victims are also among the most visually disturbing consequences of the Vietnam War. Few who look at photographer Philip Jones Griffiths’s powerful book of photographs “Agent Orange: ‘Collateral Damage’ in Vietnam” have the stomach to do so twice. *It is easier to keep one’s distance, to not look at all.*<sup>144</sup>

The specter conjured by Purity’s mention of “deformed babies,” then, is that of the U.S government’s violent military interventionism in Asia, broadly construed. Like the U.S government’s rhetorical distancing of its victims in Vietnam, Purity’s attempt to shield herself from contamination illuminates the myopic fantasy undergirding these kinds of purity politics: the fantasy that one can somehow disentangle oneself from historical events that seem, initially, to be at a geographical and temporal remove. This kind of disentangling or separation is an impossibility, Ozeki suggests, one that inevitably results in the return of these jettisoned histories through hauntings—through “ghosts and gaps,

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Minnesota Press, 2008), 6-7

<sup>141</sup> Ozeki, 145

<sup>142</sup> There were less birth defects as a result of Hiroshima / Nagasaki, but the conflation of these two in the (American) cultural imaginary is interesting / prevalent. We might also think of the U.S’ ongoing presence in Iraq as part of this historical lineage.

<sup>143</sup> “Veterans’ Diseases Associated With Agent Orange” *U.S Department of Veterans Affairs*, <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/conditions/>

<sup>144</sup> Nguyen and Hughes, “The Forgotten Victims of Agent Orange,” 2017. Emphasis my own.

seething absences, and muted presences” that can only be banished through empathic engagement, through *looking*.<sup>145</sup>

What *A Tale for the Time Being* ultimately rejects, then, is a version of empathic translation that eschews such violent elisions or hauntings for the sake of a narrative of historical purity. The novel argues most explicitly against this kind of historical translation through its treatment of Haruki #2’s “Empathy Productivity Software,” which appears, on the surface, to inaugurate the redemptive father / daughter arc at the end of the novel. Before turning to a reading of this software and the rationale behind it, however, I want to briefly consider Haruki #2’s grapplings with the concepts of historical “conscience” and “shame,” which inform this would-be redemptive arc. Haruki #2, it is eventually revealed, was fired from his job in Silicon Valley *not* as a result of the dot-com bubble bursting, but because of a realization that the computer software he’d designed had been purchased by the U.S military. This weighed on him, he says, because the interfaces he’d designed had no built-in mechanism for control or conscience. “Killing people,” he says to Nao, “should not be so much fun.”<sup>146</sup> Haruki #2 went to great lengths to try to prevent the abuse of the software, trying “to convince members of his development team to let him program some kind of reality check into the interface design, so that the poor pilots would wake up and understand the madness of what they were doing.”<sup>147</sup> This failed, of course, and Haruki #2 was fired, forced to move back to Japan, and fell into a deep depression.

In his conversations with a psychologist in California about his predicament at work, Haruki #2 tries to arrive at a definition of conscience that is separate from that of

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<sup>145</sup> Gordon, 21.

<sup>146</sup> Ozeki, 387.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

historical shame. The dictionary definition of conscience—"a knowledge or sense of right and wrong, with a compulsion to do right"—stymies him: "knowledge I understand," he says, "but how about sense? Is sense the same as feeling? Is conscience a fact that I can learn and know, or is it more like an emotion? Is it related to empathy? Is it different than shame? And why is it a compulsion?"<sup>148</sup> He relays the example of the Japanese government's account of the Second World War as motivated not by conscience, but shame:

History is something we Japanese learn about at school," he said. "We study about terrible things, like how the atom bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. We learn this is wrong, but that is an easy case because we Japanese people were the victims of it. A harder case is when we study about a terrible Japanese atrocity like Manchu. In this case, we Japanese people committed genocide and torture of the Chinese people, and so we learn we must feel great shame to the world. But shame is not a pleasant feeling, and some Japanese politicians are always trying to change our children's history textbooks so that these genocides and tortures are not taught to the next generation. By changing our history and our memory, they try to erase all of our shame."<sup>149</sup>

The Japanese government's obfuscation of its role in committing wartime atrocities rejects conscience in order to displace the uncomfortable feeling of historical shame. But Haruki #2's recognition of this censorship as dubious calls into question his reconciliation with Nao at the end of the novel. After viewing a video, posted online, of Nao being physically and sexually assaulted at her school, Haruki laments his inability to keep his daughter safe because of his own struggles with depression. "I was like a blind man," he says, "too selfish because I couldn't see, and my only concern was for myself."<sup>150</sup> (382). This experience moves him to create an online encryption and security system called "Mu-Mu Vital Hygienics," designed to help people "clean up" their web presences.<sup>151</sup> He

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<sup>148</sup> Ozeki, 307.

<sup>149</sup> Ozeki, 308.

<sup>150</sup> Ozeki, 382.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid. "Mu," Ruth's footnote helpfully points out, derives from the Japanese Kanji for "not, naught, nothing, nil, non-, un-."

develops a “neat little spider [Mu-Mu] that could crawl up internet search engine databases and sanitize all instances of my daughter’s name and personal information, as well as all the pictures and nasty videos,” making her “super-squeaky clean” again. After this digital purification process, Haruki #2 boasts that his daughter was “very happy to make a fresh start in her new life in Montreal, Canada.”<sup>152</sup>

Given the extended critique of history-writing that precedes it, Haruki’s version of Nao’s redemptive ending is to be read against its overly-optimistic grain—not least because its “happy ending” culminates in a not-America that Ozeki has shown to be an imagined utopia. By censoring these elements of Nao’s personal (and digital) history, Haruki #2 portends to be acting on his daughter’s behalf, but is in fact motivated by self-serving interests; in seeking to displace the shame he feels at failing to help Nao, he engages in the same logic of selective memory as the war narrative in the Japanese History textbooks. *A Tale for the Time Being* eschews this kind of purity politics for a translational—which is to say, a messier and more partial—approach to writing and reading history. As Ruth points out in the epilogue to the novel, there is a profound and intimate power that inheres in “not-knowing”—in letting the ghosts of violent histories, and the translational absences that signal their presence, speak.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ozeki, 403.

Chapter Three: Imperial Nostalgia and Plastic Narration  
in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*

Against (Narrative) Purity

Triangulating the United States, Japan, and Brazil at the close of the 20th century, Karen Tei Yamashita's 1991 novel *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* explores the problems of visual representation that attend environmental violence on a global scale. On one level, the novel functions as a rather straightforward allegory for what Nixon calls "capitalism's innate tendency to abstract in order to extract," drawing on a mostly omniscient, nonhuman narrator to hone in on the subtle scales of environmental destruction that are obscured by a locally-situated, anthropocentric view.<sup>154</sup> But the novel also diverges from certain genres of environmentally-minded literature, including magical realism and speculative fiction, that articulate a critique of slow violence through a poetics of mourning for "a world that has passed, or is passing away."<sup>155</sup> While Yamashita takes pains to show how Brazilians (and Brazil) are exploited by an essentially neo-colonialist economic structure, she avoids depicting the people, animals, and ecosystems of the "developing world" as objects of pathos needing recuperation or salvation. In this way, *Through the Arc* refuses to traffic in what Renato Rosaldo calls "imperialist nostalgia": an affect, or structure of feeling, that relies on a paradoxical posture of "'innocent yearning' [that] capture[s] people's imaginations ... conceal[s their] complicity with often brutal domination."<sup>156</sup> Framing the very idea of the uncontaminated self (or environment) as a product of imperialist nostalgic thinking, *Through the Arc* rejects this affective mode for

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<sup>154</sup> Nixon, 41.

<sup>155</sup> Shalini Rupesh Jain, "Pigeons, Prayers, and Pollution: Recoding the Amazon Rain Forest in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rain Forest*," *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 47 no. 3 (2016), 73.

<sup>156</sup> Renato Rosaldo, "Imperialist Nostalgia," *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory (1989), 108.

the generative possibilities that might inhere in the toxic, the degraded, or the polluted. In so doing, Yamashita extends the critique of purity politics that Ozeki raises in the conclusion of *A Tale for the Time Being*, here tracing the ways in which discourses of purity—material, biological, ecological—serve, paradoxically, as contaminants or threats to the diverse forms of life that *Through the Arc* explores.

*Through the Arc* signals its engagement with imperialist nostalgia in its opening epigraph, where Yamashita cites the “striking innocence, boundless nostalgia, and terrible ruthlessness” of Claude Levi-Strauss’ 1955 ethnography of Brazil, *Tristes Tropiques*, as inspiration for the novel.<sup>157</sup> Before turning to Yamashita’s novel, then, I wish to offer a quick reading of Levi-Strauss’ ethnographic text and its conception of “developed” and “developing” worlds, as this serves as a blueprint for the fantasies of ideological and cultural purity that *Through the Arc* seeks to disrupt. Levi Strauss begins this ethnography with a contradictory pronouncement: “travelling and travellers are two things I hate, and yet here I am, ready to tell the story of my expeditions.”<sup>158</sup> Summoned by his supervisor and colleague George Dumas to take part in a French University mission in Sao Paulo, Levi-Strauss’ reservations have less to do with the inanities of travel than with the fact that the very idea of “the journey”—the mission to discover and, potentially, aid in the “development” of countries abroad—carries with it the taint of the west’s imperial projects, forcing the western subject to confront this shameful history at every turn. Drawing on the language of pollution and contamination to describe this dynamic, he observes:

travel, in such circumstances, can only bring us face to face with our historical existence in its unhappiest aspects. The great civilization of the West has given birth to many marvels; but at what a cost! ... the order and harmony of the West depends upon the elimination of that prodigious quantity of maleficent by-

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<sup>157</sup> Karen Tei Yamashita, *To The Arc of the Rainforest* (Minneapolis: Coffee House Books, 1990), preface.

<sup>158</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, trans. John Russell (New York: Criterion Books, 1955), 9

products which now pollutes the earth. What travel has now to show us is the filth, our filth, that we have thrown in the face of humanity.<sup>159</sup>

For Levi-Strauss, travel is an “unhappy” enterprise for the western subject because it collapses the imagined separation between the West and the developing world. Christiano Silviano has observed, in this vein, how *Tristes Tropiques* turns on a “fundamental notion... of the original distance between civilizations... [whereby] all the many cultures on the planet, including the Western, should have preserved themselves, but instead they did not remain separate. They drew together, touched each other, communicated intimately.”<sup>160</sup> Levi Strauss describes the West and non-West as differently temporalized spaces—“the tropics are less exotic than *out of date*”—whose initial contact violated an unspoken, yet sacrosanct, notion of geographic, cultural, and ideological purity.<sup>161</sup> The historical imbrication of developed and developing worlds through the perverse violence of colonialism produced—and continues to produce—a melancholy affect, one that is given narrative expression through the language of contamination.

Beginning *Through the Arc* by way of a reference to *Tristes Tropiques*, Yamashita places the entwined legacies of empire and development—and the toxic affects these histories engender—at the forefront of her narrative. If *A Tale for the Time Being* resists purity politics through empathic engagement with the untranslatable—that border between self and other (or others) that cannot be transgressed—then *Through the Arc of the Rainforest* would appear, at least initially, to do the exact opposite, dissolving borders in absurd and often grotesque ways. In so doing, the novel suggests that the very idea of an “uncontaminated” history (or historical subject) is a romantic fiction, one with roots

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<sup>159</sup> Levi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 39.

<sup>160</sup> Levi-Strauss, 13.

<sup>161</sup> Levi-Strauss, 106.

in the colonial west. I begin my reading of *Through the Arc*'s translational critique by outlining the affordances of the novel's plastic narrator, thinking through what human/nonhuman relations such a perspective enables or encourages readers of the novel to see. I then extend this reading to the modes of translation that populate in the novel, and argue that, by making legible moments of translational failure and misunderstanding, *Through the Arc*'s plastic narrator draws a parallel between anglophone conceptions of the "global" and the anthropocentrism of dominant strains of environmental activism, instead working to recuperate "impure" narrative and environmentality as a place from which to begin critique or reparative work.

### Mapping the Materials of Empire

My reading of *Through the Arc* centers around Yamashita's deployment of plastic as a narrative device that subverts the historically-constituted boundaries between natural and artificial, healing and toxic, "first" and "third" worlds. A synthetic substance, plastic is both derived from organic materials and manmade; the point of view it offers is human and nonhuman, natural and unnatural. By presenting her narrative through a plastic narrator, Yamashita invites us to read the novel's eco-translational encounters through a synthetic perspective that refuses to offer a totalizing perspective. While ecocritics have been quick to read the figurations of plastic in *Through the Arc* as an example of global petrocapiatalism's duly destructive and obfuscatory qualities, many of them have tended to overlook race—and Asian American racialization in particular—as one of the problematics that *Through the Arc*'s plastic descriptions refract.<sup>162</sup> My own reading of

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<sup>162</sup> This impulse to decouple *Through the Arc* from Asian Americanist critique is surprisingly prevalent in ecocritical responses to the novel. In an article that builds on Ursula Heise's influential 2004 critique of the novel, for instance, Treasa de Loughry claims that *Through the Arc* "necessitates a reading that moves beyond Asian American categories towards analysis of how regional identity translate into scenarios of global connectivity and ecological alienation." "Petromodernity, Petro-Finance and Plastic in Karen Tei Yamashita's *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53, no. 3 (2017), 331.

these descriptions is informed by the corrective suggestion offered by Michelle Huang, that plastic be understood as a kind of “Asian American racial form.”<sup>163</sup> Plastics, Huang writes, help illuminate “how Asian American racialization materializes and circulates even in the absence of readily identifiable human bodies.”<sup>164</sup> They also provide an apt visual metaphor for race’s durability in the American political imaginary. Though the ways in which it has been visually construed and legally enforced have shifted over the course of the twentieth-century (and into the twenty-first), race—as a conceptual category with the power to delimit political citizenship or take life at will—is both an omnipresent part of American life and slow to degrade. One need only look to the current state of US politics as a response to Obama-era claims to be “post-racial” to grasp that histories of racialization are at their most toxic when treated as invisible.

This, too, is one of the plastic’s more peculiar contradictions: its tendency to go largely unseen or unremarked upon despite its voluminous, and toxic, presence in our daily lives. Heather Davis calls this the “trick of plastic”: “through its seductive surface, its alchemical qualities, its mutability,” she writes, “we treat plastics as if they are ephemeral, somehow vanishing into the ether after they have been discarded.”<sup>165</sup> Anxieties about the negative environmental and health effects of plastics are a relatively recent phenomenon, and—especially in the United States—marked by class and race. In other words, if early to mid-twentieth-century plastics were a cutting-edge technology that white, upper-middle class Americans stood to profit from, by the eve of the millennium plastics had become something for that same demographic to manage and

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<sup>163</sup> Michelle Huang, “Ecologies of Entanglement in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* Vol. 20, Issue 1 (2017), 99. Huang’s ideas about racial form here build on Colleen Lye’s work in her influential 2004 book, *America’s Asia: Racial Form and Asian American Literature, 1893-1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

<sup>164</sup> Huang, “Ecologies of Entanglement,” 105.

<sup>165</sup> Heather Davis, “Imperceptibility and Accumulation: Political Strategies of Plastic,” *Camera Obscura* 31, no. 2 (92), 2016, 233.

keep at bay.<sup>166</sup> The local and global communities most vulnerable to plastic's deleterious effects—namely, the global poor—are also those least visible within media constructions of U.S exceptionalism. Capitalist enterprising relies on this nationalist illusion of class containment—and the concomitant obfuscation of harm towards lower classes both at home and abroad—to carry out its extractive and environmentally harmful projects.

It is with an eye to these two qualities—durability and containment—that I read the figurations of plastic in *Through the Arc*. Neither purely objective nor parody of objectivism, the novel's plastic narrator presents "a view from an [Asian Pacific] body that resists the "god trick" of omniscience, that world-making fiction that allows for seeing "everything from nowhere" from the "unmarked positions of Man and White."<sup>167</sup> The ball foresees the entanglement of the human characters' lives as they converge on the Matacao, but is unable to communicate with them or intervene in the outcome of the story.<sup>168</sup> The ball likens its relationship with humankind, rather, as "one of those situations ... in which the pet is obviously more perceptive than the master"—a simile that reflects the other-than-human skewed histories at the centre of the novel.<sup>169</sup> The ball's ability to translate the language of nostalgia—to make visible what nostalgia obscures or occludes—hinges, crucially, on its inability to process human emotion. "My clairvoyance

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<sup>166</sup> One recalls Mr. McGuire's now ironically dated advice—"there's a great future in plastics"—to young Ben Braddock in Mike Nichol's 1967 film *The Graduate*. We might think of recycling projects or the push to pay for plastic bags at ritzy grocery stores as exemplary of the shift in the privileged class' relation to plastic; these upper class "waste management" techniques that lend the illusion of containment and orderliness while obscuring, at that same time, the more unsavory elements of America's wasteful consumerism.

<sup>167</sup> Per Donna Haraway: "I am arguing for politics and epistemologies of location, positioning, and situating, where partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims. I am arguing for a view from a body, an always complex, contradictory, structuring, and structured body, versus the view from above, from nowhere, from simplicity." "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism," *Feminist Studies* 14, no.3, (1988), 589.

<sup>168</sup> "I saw with simple clairvoyance strange events far to our north and deep in the Amazon Basin, events as insignificant as those in a tiny northeastern coastal town wedged tightly between multicolored dunes, and events as prestigious as those of the great economic capital of the world, New York, would each cast forth an invisible line, shall I say, leading us to a place they would all call the Matacao" (Yamashita 15).

<sup>169</sup> Yamashita, 24

was ... limited to fact," the ball acknowledges, and "human emotions ... escaped me."<sup>170</sup> While this inability to comprehend emotion is presented as a limitation, it actually brings with it a decided advantage, allowing for detached and often skeptical accounts of human affects like nostalgia or romance that in turn elevate the status of the novel's nonhuman characters.

Within the object-centered field of vision that the narrator presents, the enormous expanse of solidified plastic at center of the novel, the Matacao, emerges as a site of shifting and often contradictory meanings. Though the origins of this plastic field are viewed as a "miracle" of nature by the Brazilian public, it is not until the end of the novel that the true provenance of the Matacao is revealed: this formation is the result of huge landfills of nonbiodegradable material from the developed world having undergone intense pressure and been pushed through the Earth's mantle to "virgin areas" of the world like the Amazon rainforest. For native Brazilian Mane Pena, this revelation comes as little surprise—he "had been telling tales of the impossibility of tapping underground water sources [in the area] for as long as he could remember," even going so far as to share his insights for a documentary years before its official discovery.<sup>171</sup> For a metropolitan audience, Mane's "toothless grin" and "regional tongue" function as confirmation of the developing world's "illiterate, backward, and superstitious" people, and despite having alerted the authorities to the existence of this plastic mantle, Mane is not invited to participate in its development.<sup>172</sup> In fact, when the Matacao is finally unearthed, it inaugurates the first of Mane Pena's many displacements from his home. Accepting the government's offer to live in the "low-cost, riverside condominiums built

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<sup>170</sup> Yamashita, 167.

<sup>171</sup> Yamashita, 16.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

on the edges of the Matacao,” he and his family are forced out when a private real estate company bulldozes these and replaces them with “American franchises wedged between and under exclusive penthouses with heliports and hotels.” They are then forced to watch from their new domicile, a “shack built of construction residue,” as tourists flock to this newly minted “wonder[s] of the world,” while cobbling together odd jobs related to the burgeoning tourist trade on the Matacao.<sup>173</sup>

A junkyard in the Amazonian rainforest several kilometers from the Matacao becomes a similarly unlikely tourist site, though one whose presence has transformed the surrounding ecosystems in more overtly grotesque ways. The space—an “enormous parking lot” laced with napalm and filled with an array of American-made cars from the past fifty years—is touted as an ecological miracle, heralded for the new species of exotic animals and plants that have adapted to this toxic environment. Outposts called “Bromeliads” are established on the route to the junkyard, where franchise owners use these posts to charge tourists exorbitant prices for basic amenities like toilet paper; the name “Bromeliad,” the narrator-ball notes, deriving from “the tropical plant that can draw sustenance from a leafy water cup filled with dead matter.”<sup>174</sup> The Brazilians whose lives are disrupted or displaced by these foreign enterprises are forced to make a living in this way: by drawing sustenance from the dead matter of U.S empire. To the tourists who flock to the Matacao, there is little difference between the new species of butterfly living in the junkyard jungle and the “primitive” Brazilians who provide a colourful backdrop to the natural wonder; both are viewed through the prism of a kind of nostalgia for an undeveloped, yet cannily resilient, “natural” world.

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<sup>173</sup> Yamashita, 17.

<sup>174</sup> Yamashita, 99.

What the Matacao and the junkyard offer, then, are divergent versions of how the United States (or the “developed world” to use the language of the novel) is sustained by the “waste” of projects from which it has already benefited once, to the economic disadvantage and displacement of the global poor. The developed world’s disavowal of its complicity in this system is aided by a media narrative that emphasizes its distance from the problems in the developing world—its geographical and ethical purity. Indeed, there is a tendency in the U.S context to reframe global environmental crises in such a way that the U.S is not only no longer a perpetrator of the problem, but the de-facto solution to it. Yamashita’s narrator notes:

there had been the debate in the late eighties and early nineties about holes in the Earth’s ozone layer and the greenhouse effect. In those days, everyone, whether they understood anything about it, seemed to blame Brazil for burning down the forest and replacing oxygen-producing plant life with roaming cattle and carbon dioxide. The big problem, people said, was that Brazil hadn’t asked permission to destroy Earth. But who had? At one time there were as many “save the rainforest” groups as there were lambada clubs in L.A and New York ... Never mind the poor homeless forest people, the Indians in extinction, and most of the species of life on Earth. What about the air? But like *lambada*, all that became passé.<sup>175</sup>

The suggestion that Brazil is somehow responsible for this currently-unfolding ecological catastrophe is a media fiction, far removed from the material realities of the situation that Kazumasa’s ball illustrates. The quick rise and fall of the “save the rainforest” groups likewise underscores how media representations of disaster engender a culture, in the west, in which both empathy and attention spans are short-lived. Indeed, as Nixon’s work makes abundantly clear, we live in a media climate which demands that violence be ever more spectacular and punctual in its articulations for it to be visible at all. Within this context, the slow and subtle markers of environmental violence—those that emerge in the day to day life of the “homeless forest people” or “Indians in extinction,” for instance—are lost or obscured. The “vegetarians in leather jackets” and “tree lovers with

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<sup>175</sup> Yamashita, 98.

digital sketch pads” who come from abroad to protest Mane Pena’s feather-healing enterprise, for instance, are extreme examples of this kind of myopia.<sup>176</sup>

But much like the typhus outbreak that indiscriminately affects “rich and poor, young and old, good and evil, beautiful and ugly ... ingenue and pervert, heterosexual and homosexual, and everyone else in between” at the end of the novel, Yamashita suggests that the inability to see ones’ implication within this planetary ecosystem is not the sole property of the global rich.<sup>177</sup> (182). Unlike the depictions of slow violence in works of magical realism—which typically seek to draw attention to the loss of indigenous cultures or ecosystems—*Through the Arc*’s environmental critique refuses to endorse a return to a pre-modern self or culture as a viable path to resistance.<sup>178</sup> The marginalized characters of *Through the Arc*, too, are thus presented neither as primitives nor objects of sympathy, but rather as complicit in the system that victimizes them, many of whom actively engage (or would, if not for economic impediments) in the destructive exploitation and extraction of natural resources. Generally speaking, each one of *Through the Arc*’s characters finds financial success and social mobility through the accidental discovery of a “miraculous” commodity: Mane Pena’s simple method for healing ailments (rubbing a feather over the ear) becomes a global phenomenon; Batista Djapan’s hobby of homing pigeons develops into an international courier service; and Chico Paco’s pilgrimage to the Matacao blossoms into a radio enterprise and a national phenomenon. The novel’s protagonist, Japanese national Kazumasa Ishimaru, is the beneficiary of not one but two such “miracles” that propel his journey in crucial ways. A mysterious

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<sup>176</sup> Yamashita, 154.

<sup>177</sup> Yamashita, 182.

<sup>178</sup> For more on the intersections between magical realism and forms of environmental nostalgia, see Faris, Wendy B. and Lois Parkinson Zamora, *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

accident as a child—wherein a plastic ball with mystical properties attaches itself to his head—becomes the catalyst for a career in rail safety, eventually bringing him to Brazil, while a lottery win, also inaugurated by the ball, facilitates his integration into Brazilian society.

Edward J. Mallot has noted how Kazumasa's journey to Brazil, beginning with the discovery of his plastic ball, follows a "disturbing capitalist arc" that mirrors the ways in which early religious relics came to circulate in the commodity sphere.<sup>179</sup> After years working as a beloved safety inspector on Japan's national rail line, where his plastic ball roots out sections of worn-down track, Kazumasa and his ball are replaced by a more cost-effective machine and demoted to a less desirable position on the Tokyo rail line. Anxious about his lack of romantic prospects in Japan, Kazumasa makes the decision to "export" his talents to Brazil, where he encounters a comparatively "massive, inefficient [country] encumbered by bureaucracy, graft and poverty" (11). His lottery win shortly after arriving in the country serves a dual function in the larger context of the novel. It works, firstly, to ironize the ways in which Asian migration—and Asian labour—often first become visible through the apparition of financial windfall. This dynamic is borne out by the descriptions of Japanese labourers in the novel, who are either invisibilized in their own cloistered sections of the country or else recognized, first, as a "brand" name.<sup>180</sup> "In a country where the disparity between wealth and poverty is great," the narrator observes,

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<sup>179</sup> "Miracle revealed, miracle commodified, miracle outdated, miracle exported," (np). "Signs Taken for Wonders, Wonders Taken for Dollar Signs: Karen Tei Yamashita and the Commodification of Miracle." *ARIEL* 35.3-4 (July-October 2004), 115.

<sup>180</sup> With respect to the former, Kazumasa observes how "most of the Japanese who had immigrated [to Brazil] seemed to live in a quaint clump in an urban setting much like Tokyo [or else] ... in the country growing Chinese cabbage, daikon, and tea." (9) The sweeping success of his cousin Hiroshi's Karaoke business, by contrast—recognizable by "neon signs scrawled in deep blue with the word's 'Hiro's Karaoke'" that spread from "major cities like Rio, Belo Horizonte, Salvador, Recife, [and] Manaus" to "almost every town in South America"—illustrates the latter dynamic (88).

the news of instant wealth spread in and out of every obscure crevice of that massive and unexplored land. Kazumasa became a household name, like a character in a nightly soap opera, on the tip of every Brazilian tongue. The media milked his story for everything it was worth, from the story of his boyhood on the shores of the Japan sea to weird speculations about nature and the uncanny messages and their possible connection to ... Kazumasa's ball.<sup>181</sup>

Kazumasa's great fortune is attributed here to that which "marks him as alien": his Japanese origins as well as his unusual plastic appendage.<sup>182</sup> His cooptation by JB Tweep and GGG industries is motivated, Yamashita suggests, by a similar anxiety over the sudden appearance of an "eccentric" Japanese immigrant of unimaginable fortune (87). In this way, *Through the Arc* speculates that it is the west's frenetic reaction to the emergence of an alien transpacific financial power that will serve as the catalyst for unimaginable ruin.

Kazumasa's lottery win calls attention to both the structures of oppression that serve as impediments to social mobility in Brazil and to his own ambivalent position within this highly stratified social space. Rachel Lee has suggested, in this vein, that what Yamashita presents in *Through the Arc* is "a world where Asian immigrants to the Americas are just as likely to be the owners of capital and the exploiters of labor as to be the persecuted migrant worker."<sup>183</sup> While this is undeniably apt, there is also a sense in which the distinction Lee underlines here nearly ceases to matter in Yamashita's Brazil, where people are indiscriminately incorporated into a capitalist system that forces them to act in immoral (and often illegal) ways. Kazumasa's inability to use his newfound fortune for good, for instance—despite an ever-regenerating fund of cash—is reflective of this dynamic.<sup>184</sup> Kazumasa approaches his lottery win with an almost parodic altruism,

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<sup>181</sup> Yamashita, 58.

<sup>182</sup> Bahng, 130.

<sup>183</sup> Rachel Lee, 118.

<sup>184</sup> Unbeknownst to Kazumasa, Hiroshi invests and (re)invests his cousin's winnings until they are literally infinite. Yamashita writes, that Hiroshi "was incapable of allowing Kazumasa's fortune to

aiming to be the “Japanese Santa Claus” by granting wishes to an unending line of Brazilian citizens. His plan is quickly thwarted, however, by the material inequities of Brazilian society: “given the opportunity to imagine happiness,” he notes, “people could only imagine things, and so many of the things they imagined were basic to their well-being: food, shelter, clothing, medicine, health care ... the need was so great, so big, and so deep that it boggled the imagination.”<sup>185</sup> Though Kazumasa continues to grant wishes at an astonishing rate—even to people who have frequented his charity line multiple times—he quickly realizes that “his pleasure in granting any wish was as ephemeral as the wish itself: a woman who received a washing machine had no plumbing to run water to it; a family with a new refrigerator had no food to store in it; wheelchairs broke down without oil and repair; medical facilities had no personnel to run them.”<sup>186</sup> This dynamic applies as much to manufactured goods as to the resources of the “natural” world: when Matacao plastic becomes a lucrative commodity, native Brazilians are unable to profit from it: “it seemed to be of no consequence that those who uncovered a piece of Matacao plastic in most cases did not have the technology to cut even a splinter of the stuff away from the mother lode,” Yamashita writes, and “some people wept at the sight of the shiny stuff, which reflected back a dull image of their happiness.”<sup>187</sup>

Kazumasa’s inability to uplift the economically vulnerable is reflective, on the one hand, of the rigidity of the systems of oppression that govern the social space of Brazil. But there is also a sense in which Kazumasa is a willing (if unwitting) participant in the very systems of capitalistic exploitation he is trying to remedy. Despite advances in

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dwindle away to the predictable nothing, the absolute zero that Kazumasa envisioned. This money that came out of poor people’s dreams should thus return to those very dreams, but Hiroshi did not see it that way. He learned very quickly that great wealth generates greater wealth, that the stakes were greater and the returns greater yet.” (87) He refers to this in yet another instance as “recycling capital” (81).

<sup>185</sup> Yamashita, 86.

<sup>186</sup> Yamashita, 149.

<sup>187</sup> Yamashita, 144.

technologies for the development of Matacao plastic, Kazumasa and his plastic ball—whose magnetic properties can detect deposits of this super plastic—are figured as they “key to this incredible source of wealth.”<sup>188</sup> Kazumasa’s acquiescence to Tweep’s project implicate him within the neocolonial transformation of the Amazon rainforest while pointing to a longer history of Japanese imperialist activity in Latin America (and elsewhere): as Aimee Bahng notes, the image of the ball pulling Kazumasa to the deposits of Matacao plastic is evocative of “Japan’s history as an empire hungry for resource-rich territories, resulting in increased military expansionism in the 1930s in Manchuria, Micronesia, and Southeast Asia but also to more contemporary investments of Japanese global capital in Latin America.”<sup>189</sup> The ball, then, comes to symbolize the burden(s) of history, which are inescapable and always primed for mining and exploitation; what the excavation of the Matacao gives rise to in this context, Bahng suggests, is “an ‘other’ narrative of Asian American migration,” one that probes “Japan’s sometimes contradictory connections to the expansive logics of late capitalism.”<sup>190</sup>

One of the ways in which Kazumasa’s ball invites us to “see,” then, is by literalizing the subjectless perspective that Kandice Chuh advocates for in her groundbreaking work *Imagine Otherwise*. Taking issue with identity-based theorizations of Asian American subjectivity while recognizing, at the same time, the historical imperative for such constructions, Chuh implores us to recognize “the discursive constructiveness of subjectivity”: namely, how subjects “only become recognizable and can act as such by conforming to certain regulatory matrices.”<sup>191</sup> *Through the Arc’s*

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<sup>188</sup> Yamashita, 144.

<sup>189</sup> Bahng, 129.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* There is an unshakeable quality to this historical haunting and its acting on the body, one that the ball appears to acknowledge when it observes that “Kazumasa could, if necessary, divest himself of his monetary fortune, but he could not rid himself of me.” Yamashita, 145.

<sup>191</sup> Chuh, *Imagine Otherwise*, 9.

presentation of this subjectless perspective works, I venture, to broaden the linguistic, geographical, and temporal scope of transpacific Asian Americanist critique, rerouting the field of focus to a non-anglophone “America” through historical entanglements with other imperial powers and diasporic communities.

If Kazumasa’s developmental arc works to show how history intervenes in the literal and discursive production of Asian/ American subjectivity, Mane Pena’s economic and social transformation—from quirky local to “father of featherology”—demonstrates the historical production of yet another unwieldy subject: that of the global poor.<sup>192</sup> As with Kazumasa, the conflicting impulses undergirding Mane’s story are made visible through the detached perspective of the plastic ball, only here the narrative is further mediated by a form of translation technology that the novel aligns with the practice of interlingual dubbing. Mane’s first appearances in the novel all take the form of television interviews, where he is called upon to act as a font of folk knowledge about topics as diverse as the viability of the post-Matacao forest or the art of feather-healing. Mane is frequently presumed to be indigenous (or indigenous-adjacent) in these interviews (“no, he didn’t know if the Indians used the feather for the same purposes, but his great-great grandmother, they said, was Indian”), a (mis)reading that occurs, curiously, in critical accounts of the novel *Through the Arc* as well.<sup>193</sup> Shalini Rupesh Jain reads Mane Pena’s feather-healing practice, for instance, as an “indigenous mode of living” that, by way of its “simplicity and altruism ...appear[s] to present a way of living that is infused with “magic” to Western eyes but [is] in fact a celebration of life guided by an ethics of care for human and non-human inhabitants of the planet.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Yamashita, 150.

<sup>193</sup> Yamashita, 23.

<sup>194</sup> Jain, 69.

There is a duplicitous aura of “native authenticity” that attends Mane Pena’s televised image, in other words, one that Yamashita suggests accrues in cultural capital as it moves across linguistic borders. This is borne out by JB Tweep’s extreme reaction to Mane’s feather interview tape. After GGG’s profitability calculator deems the feather (and feather-healing method) to be ideal objects for commercial exploitation, the translation of Mane’s “strange language” is likened to an emergency of international proportions: ‘We need to know what they’re saying,’ he exclaims, “We need an interpreter. Maybe we can get someone from the U.N. This is of utmost importance!”<sup>195</sup> It is through this mystifying translational process, *Through the Arc* suggests, that nature and “the natural” become commercially “viable.”

### Dubbing as Linguistic Alchemy

On some level, Mane is aware of the ways in which his economic and social ascendance is the product of forces outside of his immediate lived reality. This is made evident by his frequent references to television—and specifically the remote control—that he makes when describing his transformation. “Like the remote control and the buttons on his new tv,” Mane explains, “the feather *made things happen*.”<sup>196</sup> But while Mane invokes television to gesture at the magical turns and “multiple roles” he has assumed in his life, the plastic ball suggests that Mane is misreading the object relations involved in this simile. A remote control, after all, requires agency, and Mane, like Kazumasa, is depicted here as having frightfully little control over the trajectory of his narrative. Mane himself admits as much when reflects on the myriad tragedies of his life:

When the government handed Mane a ravaged piece of the forest, Mane signed his mark on the dotted line. One-half of his children had died at birth, but he had just sighed. When the priest came around and told him that after twenty

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<sup>195</sup> Yamashita, 58.

<sup>196</sup> Yamashita, 18. Emphasis my own.

pregnancies his wife should consider taking her temperature, he agreed. When his first wife died from meningitis and a lack of medical facilities, he bowed his head. When powdered milk mixed with an impure water source spread dysentery among his grandchildren, he shook his head. When *sauva* ants devoured his crops, he threw up his hands. When the drought came and the sun seared the land and decimated his fields, he prayed for rain. When the rains finally came and washed the land away, Mane shrugged. *What could poor people expect?*<sup>197</sup>

Mane's recognition of his own lack of agency ("what could poor people expect?") is not borne out through lived experience alone, but through accounts of history that he has witnessed on television: "he heard that some poor people had gotten angry, formed unions, and they had been killed. It wasn't just that rubber tapper, Mendes, back in the old days (Mane Pena had seen the movie on TV; he noticed it was dubbed.); it had always been that way. Poor people survived, or they got killed."<sup>198</sup> The textual aside "he noticed it was dubbed" here is significant because it points to the insidious ways in which the history of the "developing world" gets manipulated by countries in positions of relative geopolitical power. Television dubbing in *Through the Arc* thus becomes a kind of critical shorthand for forms of historical and textual mediation that inhibit people from seeing their assimilation into economies and relations of power that they otherwise find objectionable.

In order to keep Mane as the "authentic" face of their feather enterprise, Tweep and his associates take pains to convince him that he is the only one who can preserve the integrity of the feather-healing practice. Mane notes that "Mr. Tweep said education and research were the most important things, [and] If [I] didn't want imitations and misconceptions to crop up, [I]'d better keep the matter straight and do [my] bit for the good of the feather and the good of society."<sup>199</sup> (120). Ironically, the more Mane comes to

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<sup>197</sup> Yamashita, 153. Emphasis my own.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid.

<sup>199</sup> Yamashita, 120.

accept this fiction fed to him by corporate America—that he alone is the bearer of responsibility towards the feather, and that he has a moral duty to disseminate knowledge about it—the more estranged he becomes from the people and land that lent him this veneer of “indigenous authenticity” in the first place. His observation to his wife Angustia that the barren land around the Matacao might be “fertile in a different way” is the first indication that such a change might be in the works.<sup>200</sup> Eventually, he is unable even to tell the difference between a real feather and one made of Matacao plastic.<sup>201</sup> Though Mane lacks the precise language to articulate these changes (“he was not sure what this meant, but he knew it was significant”) he likens this process, again, to the kind of disjuncture produced by television dubbing: “It was as if these buttons on his remote control had suddenly been reprogrammed to bring up a whole new set of programs, as if his TV were suddenly made to pick up signals from some foreign country like the United States. All the old shows he loved so well, all the old soap operas, everything had suddenly been made to come out somehow differently.”<sup>202</sup> And while this self-conscious moment seems critical, at first, of a particular brand of US globalism, it is quickly undercut by the pleasure he takes by staring at his own mediated, dubbed image: “he stared at the TV, then he stared at the two feathers. He pressed the buttons on his remote control. Lately he enjoyed watching himself give lectures in languages he could not understand. He liked to watch his own mouth moving with these strange voices coming out. He found it especially amusing to hear himself talk Chinese or Japanese.”<sup>203</sup> Though these dubbed images are a poor substitute for the intimacy and real connection of his

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<sup>200</sup> Yamashita, 77.

<sup>201</sup> Yamashita, 157.

<sup>202</sup> Yamashita, 151.

<sup>203</sup> Yamashita, 158.

former life, Mane “console[s] himself with the company of his color tv,” noting wryly that “he had been told that history would exonerate him in the end.”<sup>204</sup>

Within the field of translation studies, dubbing is a particularly controversial and much-maligned topic. Abe Mark Nornes has suggested that this is because dubbing “calls attention to the mediation of translation in the most troubling of ways.”<sup>205</sup> While dubbing is most frequently associated with film and television, literary critics, especially those working in the field of transnational Asian American studies, have begun to think about dubbing as it relates to the narration of multilingual realities. Ben Tran offers the concept of “literary dubbing” to describe “a translation in which the language that the reader encounters on the page is not the same language that the character thinks and speaks.”<sup>206</sup> For Tran, literary dubbing is a “primary mechanism for [the] problematic transmutation whereby Anglophone literature comes to represent a multilingual or non-Anglophonic context in a monolingual frame. These are works in which the English language, amid other languages, rises to the top and forms the surface tension of the fictional world ... literary dubbing elides language, which in turn masks its translation. It obscures, if not displaces, both the characters’ original voices and their original languages”<sup>207</sup>

Given this, I venture that *Through the Arc*’s engagement with dubbing is twofold. It emerges firstly, as I have shown, in the ball’s overt references to instances of televisual dubbing, which demonstrate the insidious ways in which western media conglomerates and business entities shape (and produce) historical subjects. The media misreading of the developing world as pure—and the ease with which that imagined purity is

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<sup>204</sup> Yamashita, 152.

<sup>205</sup> Nornes, *Cinema Babel*, 209.

<sup>206</sup> Ben Tran, “Negative Paradise: Rethinking Anglophone and World Literature as Literary Dubbing,” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 64, no. 1 (2018), 154.

<sup>207</sup> Tran, “Negative Paradise,” 157.

commercially exploited by the west—is evinced by JB Tweep’s reaction to Mane’s televised interview about the feather healing method. After GGG’s profitability calculator deems the feather (and feather-healing method) to be ideal objects for commercial exploitation, the translation of Mane’s “strange language” is likened to an emergency of international proportions: “We need to know what they’re saying,” he exclaims, “We need an interpreter. Maybe we can get someone from the U.N. This is of utmost importance!”<sup>208</sup> Here, the nonhuman and interlingual collide through the figuration of the televised translation: non-anglophone languages emerge, and come to matter, only insofar as the natural objects of the developing world become commercially viable.

But there is also a more incisive critique of global anglocentrism at work in the novel, one that works as a counterpoint to the pervasive (and frequently unremarked-upon) form of literary dubbing that Tran underscores. This is rendered most strikingly in Yamashita’s depictions of JB Tweep, whose inability to speak any language other than English is relentlessly lampooned in the novel. Moving from a linguistic environment (the US) where compulsory English-speaking is the norm, Tweep struggles in the multilingual space of Brazil, where even “the parrots [speak] as many as five languages.”<sup>209</sup> Poking fun at Tweep’s language struggles becomes the occasion for the plastic ball to break the translational third wall, calling attention to the fact that it has been performing a kind of linguistic dubbing in its narration of multilingual and multicultural realities. In one instance, for example, the ball performs a literal translation of the insults the mynah birds hurl at Tweep and his girlfriend, Michelle Mabelle: “Neither Michelle nor J.B understood the Brazilian slang, and the bird caretaker wouldn’t explain any of it,” the ball explains, and “the caretaker excused himself when the mynahs

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<sup>208</sup> Yamashita, 58.

<sup>209</sup> Yamashita, 124.

mocked with gleeful enthusiasm, ‘*Arara fresca so fala francais!*’ (‘that snob of a parrot only speaks French’) ‘*A perereca da vizinha tapresa na gaiola!*’ (Literally, the neighbor’s frog is imprisoned in a cage...) or ‘*Ei meu amigo, a terceira e pra pocar saco!*’ (Eh my friend, the third one is for scratching his balls).’’<sup>210</sup> (124). Distrustful of the multilingual birds, the ball notes how “J.B sympathized with the American magpie, Butch, who only spoke English,” with whom Michelle would often find him in conversation, Butch repeating platitudes like “Chill out. Chill out and cruise, baby!”<sup>211</sup>

What the plastic ball’s anti-literary dubbing seeks to disrupt, then, is the western compulsion towards linguistic and cultural purity. The obsession with keeping separate the languages and cultures of “developed” and “developing” worlds is given symbolic expression in Tweep’s object fetish, the paper clip.<sup>212</sup> If the clip seeks, at bottom, to keep everything “separable, disentangled, and homogenous,” then the disintegration of the clip—along with GGG’s entire product catalogue— at the end of the novel would seem to signify the folly of ever thinking this possible.<sup>213</sup> Left alone “with his three arms, scattered paper clips, and a selection of old 9.99 objects which had escaped destruction,” the novel’s parting shot of Tweep, cooing to a prosthetic arm named “Butch,” is an ode to the now-useless material trappings of American exceptionalism.

Because *Through the Arc* is invested in disrupting the notion of “cultural purity” from all angles, such caricatures are not limited to the novel’s western characters.<sup>214</sup> In

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<sup>210</sup> Ibid.

<sup>211</sup> Yamashita, 125.

<sup>212</sup> While Tweep uses comically banal language to describe his penchant for clips [“He collected clipboards or, more broadly speaking, paper clips. (J.B defined anything that held paper together as a paper clip)”], the ball frames this preoccupation with clips as a much darker compulsion, one that frequently drives him to steal or act out in inappropriate ways. Yamashita, 28.

<sup>213</sup> Shotwell, *Against Purity*, 15.

<sup>214</sup> Aimee Bahng notes that “in a reversal of the often-racialized tropes of aliens in science fiction, manifestations of the alien in [*Through the Arc*] take the shape of mutant agents of empire such as [Michelle] Mabelle and her lover J.B Tweep” (125).

one humorous scene towards the end of the narrative, the ball relays the story of Chico Paco's mother, who refuses to partake of her son's newfound wealth, instead bringing their old country life— replete with chickens, clay ovens, and traditional crops—to his high-rise apartment. Proclaiming that the only way to truly clean clothes is the old-fashioned way ("Clothes need to be beaten to stay clean!"), she sets about washing her clothes in the river, as she has always done. But the river has ceased to be the pure body of water it used to be: off in the distance, out of Dona Feliz' field of vision, the ball spies people dumping bodies from the typhus outbreak, "piranhas snatching wildly at the flesh to expose the bones."<sup>215</sup> What this scene stages, in the most gruesome way possible, is how a return to the traditional or the pre-modern is not a viable form of resistance. Culture has been irrevocably altered—corrupted, depending on whose perspective it is—and divergent cultures, languages, and creatures have encountered and altered each other in ways that are now impossible to disentangle.

*Through the Arc* ends by revisiting the problem of separation at the heart of *Tristes Tropiques*' narrative of imperialist nostalgia. Concluding with not one but two spectacular catastrophes—a typhus pandemic spread by the commercialization of Mane Pena's feather-healing practice, and an outbreak of bacteria that eats through plastic—these "natural" disasters work to show the grotesquery of capitalist consumption by collapsing the borders between producer and consumer, undeveloped and developed worlds. While media reports initially pay little mind to the typhus outbreak—mostly because the poorest populations were hit first—the typhus strain was utterly "indiscriminate in its choices," Yamashita writes, transgressing not only class and race-based boundaries but, potentially, geographic and nation-based ones too:

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<sup>215</sup> Yamashita, 188.

Just as the disease would not remain with the poor, it would not be confined to the Matacao. For the moment, most people had assumed that it would confine itself to the Third World. Europeans, Asians, and Americans eager to see the Matacao simply rearranged their vacation plans that year. Wait until they find a vaccine, they thought. Epidemics, plagues, drought, famine, terrorism, war—all things that happened to other people, poor people in the Third World who cavorted with communism and the like. When we travel, we don't drink the water, some said. Terrorists shouldn't be negotiated with either.<sup>216</sup>

What this ironic passage seeks to disrupt is the fantasy that various types of privilege (wealth, status, etc) or purity rituals ("don't drink the water") can safeguard a person from uncertain death. Even the plastic narrator of *Through the Arc* is not immune, as it recalls in great detail its own gradual "disappearance, bit by bit, particle by particle" as it is devoured by the bacteria.<sup>217</sup> Though Kazumasa is initially traumatized by the disintegration of his ball, he eventually embraces his "newfound sense of anonymity," and moves to the Brazilian countryside with his lover and her two children. But the haunting presence of the ball, narrating from beyond the grave, complicates what might otherwise be described as the novel's edenic ending. The "plantation of pineapple and sugarcane, sweet corn and coffee" that the children play upon, after all, carries with it the indelible stain of empire.<sup>218</sup> Here, the ball reminds us that narratives of resilience are always bound up with—and inextricable from—histories of exploitation and extraction, of pollution and toxicity.

It is a curious thing that both climate change deniers and environmental activists often rely on the discourse of environmental resilience to buttress their claims. This is, I would venture, ultimately because both groups are invested in a kind of purity politics, although to wildly divergent ends. The climate change deniers who are invested in economic growth and development cling to the idea of environmental resilience because

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<sup>216</sup> Yamashita, 184.

<sup>217</sup> Yamashita, 206.

<sup>218</sup> Yamashita, 211.

it allows them to pursue their goals while diminishing their complicity in the degradation of the planet, while environmental activists hold up resilience as a marker of hope that a return is possible to the natural, pre-developed—and thus, pure—world.<sup>219</sup> What *Through the Arc* ultimately stresses is that such a return is not only impossible, but undesirable. The novel's final scene renders this in particularly striking terms. Addressing *Through the Arc*'s audience in a rare moment of direct, imperative speech, the plastic ball implores the reader to:

See the crumbling remains of once modern high-rises and office buildings, everything covered in rust and mold, twisted and poisonous lianas winding over sinking balconies, trees arching through windows, a cloud of perpetual rain and mist and evasive color hovering over everything. The old forest has returned once again, secreting its digestive juices, slowly breaking everything into edible absorbent components, pursuing the lost perfection of an organism in which digestion and excretion were once one and the same. But it will never be the same again."<sup>220</sup>

Concluding her novel with this image, Yamashita refuses to align futurity with a recuperation of a “lost perfection” that never was. Instead, the reimagined space of the forest—shot through with the decaying remnants of empire and industry—embraces a future that reckons wholly with its degraded, polluted, and impure past(s). For Yamashita, an orientation towards such a future begins by acknowledging the “maleficent byproducts” of empire that continue to shape our present moment, as well as our entanglements with national, material, and linguistic others through these toxic histories. Purity is, much like the plastic narrator of *Through the Arc* itself, a fantastic impossibility.

### Coda: on Nonhuman Translation

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<sup>219</sup> For more on this peculiarity, see Nixon, as well as Ann-Sofie Gremaud's essay “Power and Purity: Nature as Resource in a Troubled Society,” *Environmental Humanities* vol 5 (2014), 77-100.

<sup>220</sup> Yamashita 212.

In the context of Actor Network Theory (ANT), a subset of the field of science, technology, and society (STS), “translation” generally refers to the interaction between actors within a discrete technological network.<sup>221</sup> Though ANT has been mobilized by scholars of the humanities in recent years—particularly in ecocritical or feminist circles—it has a somewhat vexed relationship to literary scholarship, in large part because many of its methodologies seem to undercut or oppose concerns that have historically animated literary criticism.<sup>222</sup> Indeed, the ANT version of translation—hereafter referred to as “nonhuman translation”—seems, at first blush, largely incompatible with the translational practices (interlingual, cultural, historical) queried thus far in this study, in its particular privileging of the empirical and material over the linguistic or theoretical. But despite this seeming incommensurability, I argue that nonhuman translation offers a useful framework for reading an object-oriented text like *Through the Arc*, whose concern with illuminating different scales and agents of environmental violence requires an attention to the intricate, slow-moving, and often difficult-to-detect actions that culminate in ecological transformation(s). Moreover, this attention to scalability—to movement across frames of reference both temporal and geographic—only works to align nonhuman translation with its linguistic counterparts, which perform a similar

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<sup>221</sup> For more on translation in the ANT context, see especially Michel Callon’s “Struggles and Negotiations to Define What is Problematic and What is Not: the Socio-logic of Translation” in *The Social Process of Scientific Investigation* (1981), “as well as Latour’s *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005).

“An actor in ANT is a semiotic definition – an actant – that is something that acts or to which activity is granted by another...an actant can literally be anything provided it is granted to be the source of action” Bruno Latour, “On Actor-Network Theory: a Few Clarifications,” *Soziale Welt* 47 (1996) 373.

<sup>222</sup> As Rita Felski succinctly puts it, “[ANT ...]has little interest in the linguistic turn; does not talk about identity or representation; is perplexed by a certain theoretical vocabulary (fetish, ideology, structure); and is interested in making things *more* real rather than less real.” “Comparison and Translation: A Perspective from Actor-Network Theory,” *Comparative Literature Studies*, 53 no. 4 (2016), 749.

movement across language systems. Consider, for example, the language Latour uses to define nonhuman translation:

translation (in this context) does not mean a shift from one vocabulary to another, from one French word or one English word, for instance, as if the two languages existed independently. I use[d] translation to mean displacement, drift, invention, mediation, the creation of a link that did not exist before and that to some degree modifies the original two.<sup>223</sup>

Though Latour takes pains to distance the ANT version of translation from those grounded in an interlingual modality, the language he uses to describe these supposedly distinct processes is so proximate (“shift” for “drift,” e.g) that it threatens, at times, to collapse any distinction between the two. This lexical tension suggests that these translational forms may not, in fact, be as disparate as Latour and other proponents of ANT would wish them to be. This is not to say, of course, that the interlingual might easily be substituted for the nonhuman (or vice versa), but rather that both modes of translation—in the kinds of transformational, border-crossing work that they do—offer complementary ways of conceptualizing relations between human and nonhuman agents, whether across geographic and temporal divides or linguistic ones.

Nonhuman translation also annexes the kinds of purity politics at stake in this project. Writing about the import of the ANT version of translation to literary scholars, Rita Felski observes that, by “altering” its originary object or goal, ANT aligns itself with debates in contemporary comparative literature studies around the idea of the aberrant translation or “translation as betrayal.”<sup>224</sup> (752). She qualifies this point by saying that this does not mean that translation “is just a vehicle of homogenization,” but rather that, “because translation occurs at every point in the network, the opposite is true; translation

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<sup>223</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), 179.

<sup>224</sup> Felski, “Comparison and Translation,” 752.

is associated with *unpredictability, ambiguity, impurity, and increase in “noise.”*<sup>225</sup> (my emphasis, *ibid*). A recent collaborative essay by scholars working at the intersections of STS and the humanities similarly suggests that a dialectic of purity and impurity undergirds Latour’s work as a whole, and particularly his framing of the “modern”: “[Latour’s modernity] is a both/and. It is both pure and not pure at all, and that both/and is what is distinctive about it and what why it is so productive” (Law et. al 174). What nonhuman translation shares with its interlingual cousin, then, is an insistence on the impossibility of its putative project: even though these translations strive to encapsulate a cohesive whole—be it network or text—they are marked by an implicit understanding that translational work is always partial, fragmented, and subject to change. It is, in this sense, a necessarily *impure* form.

In *Through the Arc*, nonhuman and interlingual translation are aligned through the kind of decentering work that they perform.<sup>226</sup> The former calls attention to the agency of nonhuman beings within global capitalist networks, while the latter seeks to recuperate the myriad languages and cultures flattened by an anglocentric approach to transnational exchange. Both forms of translation present themselves in Yamashita’s text as disruption; as moments of punctuation or decalage, calmly observed by the nonhuman narrator, that undo the semblance of coherence that the developed / developing world binary—and the logic of purity that subtends it—afford.

One of the hallmarks of ANT and nonhuman translation is its recognition of the agential quality of *things*—of animals and objects that lack the kind of subjectivity we typically associate with humans. Jane Bennett has written, in this vein, of what she calls

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<sup>225</sup> *Ibid*. Emphasis my own.

<sup>226</sup> John Law, Geir Afdal, Kristen Asdal, Wen-yuan Lin, Ingunn Moser, and Vicky Singleton argue that the Latourian version of purity politics has a distinctly performative dimension. “Modes of Syncretism: Notes on Incoherence,” *Common Knowledge* 20, no.1 (2013), 174.

“thing power”: the “curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle ... [thing power] is a force exercised by that which is not specifically human (or even organic) upon humans.”<sup>227</sup> Unlike other materialisms that figure the material in relation to the (human) body or capital, Bennett’s “thing power materialism” argues for an attention to the vital, agential flow of nonhumanity that circulates around (and even through) humans, as well as the capacity of nonhuman matter to “shift or vibrate between different states of being, to go from trash / inanimate / resting to treasure / animate / alert.”<sup>228</sup> Bennett’s theorization of vibrant matter—and the agential role that objects play in shaping human experience—is particularly useful in thinking through the ways in which *Through the Arc*’s nonhuman narrator offers new ways of thinking about empathic identification across species / material lines. For though the narrator ball insists that it cannot access human emotions, there is a way in which the entire affective thrust of the book hinges on the human characters’ identification with—or emotional attachment to—nonhuman animals and things, from Michelle Mabelle’s macaws and Batista DJapan’s pigeons to J.B.’s paper clips, Mane’s feather, and Kazumasa’s ball. When Kazumasa realizes his ball’s attraction to the deposits of Matacao plastic, for example, he becomes disconsolate, a fact that the ball interprets as a recognition of their material separateness: “here then was a force greater than himself, Kazumasa, my life-long friend and brother. Kazumasa wanted to cry. He had often thought of himself as my mother or father or closest earthly relation. He felt crushed at the suggestion that I had a family of my own that, having been attached to Kazumasa, I had been denied all these years. Kazumasa felt guilty. Of course, I should be allowed to

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<sup>227</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 350.

<sup>228</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 354.

join other material of my own kind. It was only just.”<sup>229</sup> Similarly, when the ball disintegrates at the end of the book, Kazumasa becomes hysterical, reverting to [speaking Japanese] as though some intimate shared language. Deploying nonhuman translation as both a narrative device and a site for empathic identification in this way, then, Yamashita asks what a transpacific history of slow violence might look like if humans—let alone Asian Americans—were not at the center. In some ways, this narratorial strategy intuits some of the rhetorical challenges of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, which centers around a human, if effectively voiceless, protagonist. I turn to Kang’s text and its engagement with the untranslatable in the following chapter.

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<sup>229</sup> Yamashita, 106.

Chapter Four: Gendered Violence and Translational Refusal  
in Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*

In the months before Deborah Smith's translation came to monopolize discussions of the novel, Han Kang's Man-Booker prize-winning *The Vegetarian* was met with effusive praise by anglophone critics, who lauded the text for its bracing and violent exploration of a South Korean housewife's psychological unravelling. On one level, the novel's enthusiastic embrace by western audience makes a certain amount of intuitive sense, as the depictions of patriarchal violence and grotesque female bodies that populate the text find resonant expression within the well-worn genre of anglophone literature that we might call, following Gilbert and Gubar, "madwoman" fiction.<sup>230</sup> Indeed, much of the western criticism on *The Vegetarian* pivots on the assumption that Kang appropriates this generic model in order to critique South Korean cultural and social mores, which are taken to be mimetically represented in the text. As one critic put it, "it is the women [in Kang's text] who are killed for daring to establish their own identity. The narrative makes it clear it is the crushing pressure of Korean etiquette which murders them."<sup>231</sup>

This feature of *The Vegetarian's* anglophone criticism—that the text presents an objective, almost anthropological look at gender relations in South Korea—is at least partly responsible for much of the deep suspicion underwriting the Korean response to

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<sup>230</sup> See Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979). Interestingly, some Korean critics credit pick up on this resonance as well: in an article titled "The Reason People Around the World Are Reading Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*," for example, literature professor and critic Kim Woong-Gyo writes (following Foucault): "violence in reaction to the unusual or abnormal is easily justified, and here, the standards for "good" or "proper behavior make a madwoman out of Yeong-hye." [in Korean] *Han'guk ilbo*, March 2016.

<sup>231</sup> Julia Pascal, "The Vegetarian by Han Kang book review: Society stripped to the bone," *The Independent*, January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-vegetarian-by-han-kang-book-review-society-stripped-to-the-bone-9969189.html>.

Smith's translation. Common to these critiques is the sense that something indelibly Korean—at the level of language, of history, or of collective cultural identity—has been mangled in Smith's rendition of the text. Academics and critics alike bemoaned the fact that Smith, who had begun learning the language only three years prior to translating the novel (and who had never once been to Korea) was now the country's literary arbiter.<sup>232</sup> The resistance to the translation is compounded by the fact that South Korea has, since at least the late nineties, invested millions of dollars into organizations and initiatives to promote Korean literature abroad, with the ultimate aim of securing the Nobel Prize in literature. When pressed why the award has so frequently eluded Korea—and not, for example, Japan and China, two countries with whom Korea's literary tradition is complexly imbricated—critics often cite the singular difficulty of the Korean language. "The Nobel committee needs to learn Korean first," offered one attendee at the recent Seoul International Book Fair, "then a Korean will win the prize."<sup>233</sup>

Taken together, the western and Korean responses to the English version of *The Vegetarian* reinscribe two key points about translatability taken up in this project thus far. The first is the presumption of fidelity, which is yoked to cultural authenticity (and, as the conference attendee's remarks suggest, cultural singularity). The second concerns the framing of translatability in terms of absolutes—the idea that there is something at stake, either politically, culturally, or monetarily, in getting the translation "right." By framing their approach to Kang's work in these terms, however, critics miss one of the novel's key

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<sup>232</sup> Literary critic Cho Jae-ryoung has argued, in this vein, that the controversy over Smith's translation of *The Vegetarian* the differential in publishing standards for translated fiction in Korea and the west: "it's also quite hypocritical how [Korean critics] would scrutinize the Korean translation of foreign literature to every word, but unconditionally hail Smith's translation. It's a double standard." Jun-bong Sin, "Debate Erupts Over the Accuracy of Translations: Literary Experts Point to Faults in English Version of *The Vegetarian*." [in Korean] *Jung-ang Ilbo*, March 2017, <https://news.joins.com/article/21339866>

<sup>233</sup> Rao, "Can a Big Government."

features—namely, the way its depictions of mental illness and gendered violence trouble pathologizing narratives from both national contexts. Though the protagonist Yeong-hye's descent into madness fits, as I have suggested, rather easily into a typified narrative of gendered submission and bodily subjugation, the novel also arguably draws upon the Korean concept of *han* (한/恨) in its exploration of female silences and their violent erasure. Read this way, the argument over *The Vegetarian's* translatability also becomes an argument about the possibilities—and limitations—that inhere in the project of translating affective structures, particularly those that are culturally and linguistically situated outside of the dominant western, anglophone paradigm.

Before turning to a reading of Kang's text, then, I offer an exploration of the various ways in which *han* has been taken up by Koreanists, Korean-Americanists, and translation scholars alike, in order to demonstrate how Kang's mobilization of this affect subverts stereotypes around gendered illness from both Korean and western contexts. I suggest, in this vein, that this tension in Kang's deployment of *han* serves a dual function. It works, firstly, to call into question one of the more prominent definitions of *han*, which sees Korea (and Koreans) as historical victims, by demonstrating how *han* presents differently along the axes of gender and national identity. By showing these fissures in the historical construction of *han* as a Korean untranslatable, *The Vegetarian* also dilates space for thinking through the ways in which other Korean-specific philosophies might intersect with critical approaches from across the Pacific. I explore this connection in greater detail in my conclusion, where I consider how the historically-situated forms of ecological resistance the novel engages in a Korean context resonate with recent attempts to adapt ecofeminist thinking to our twenty-first century moment.

### Translating Han

Despite abundant references to *han* in scholarship about Korea as well as in Korean literature and cultural productions, the concept—one of several Korean-specific affects, or structures of feeling—there is a startling lack of definitional uniformity around the term.<sup>234</sup> This is perhaps because, as Sandra So hee chi Kim observes, “the concept of *han* indexes an affective complex so wide-ranging, adaptive, and invested with cultural and national significance, that defining it precisely has been difficult for scholars.”<sup>235</sup> Often described as “a collective feeling of unresolved resentment, pain, grief, and anger”<sup>236</sup> that emerges out of Korea’s protracted colonial history, *han* is also frequently figured as a genetic condition—a kind of inherited trauma “embedded in the DNA of all Koreans.”<sup>237</sup> As such, the affect is usually recognized through a series of bodily symptoms “shaped by [a feeling of] repressiveness”<sup>238</sup>: sufferers describe “a compressed feeling of suffering,”<sup>239</sup> “a blockage, something that’s tangled up and cannot be untied.”<sup>240</sup> These bodily expressions of *han* have even been recognized as the basis for a condition called *hwabyung*—literally, “anger disease”—in a move that Kim recognizes as “the biologism of *han* taken to a logical extreme.”<sup>241</sup> Recognized by both anthropologists and medical

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<sup>234</sup> Professional Korean-to-English translator David Bannon’s essay for *Translation Journal* provides a good overview of some of the more prominently-referenced Korean untranslatables. See “Unique Korean Cultural Concepts in Interpersonal Relations,” 12, No.1, January 2008, <http://translationjournal.net/journal/43korean.html>

<sup>235</sup> Sandra So Hee Chi Kim, “Korean *Han* and the Postcolonial Afterlives of “The Beauty of Sorrow,” *Korean Studies* 41 (2017), 255.

<sup>236</sup> Sandra Kim, “Korean *Han*,” 254.

<sup>237</sup> In her autobiographical essay, “Flight,” Ishle Yi Park describes *han* as something “all Koreans feel ...because our country has always had to shut up and listen to bigger countries—Japan, Russia, America. And because of the war that split brother from sister and left everyone’s family missing or dead.” *Boston Review*, Summer 2004, <http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR29.3/park.html>

<sup>238</sup> Seo-yeong Chu, “Science Fiction and Postmemory *Han* in Contemporary Korean American Literature. *MELUS* 33, No. 4, Special Issue: Alien/ Asian (2008), 255.

<sup>239</sup> A. Sung Park, “Minjung and Process Hermeneutics,” *Process Studies* Vol. 17, No. .2, (1988), 118-126. <http://www.religion-online.org/article/minjung-and-process-hermeneutics>

<sup>240</sup> John M. Glionna, “A complex feeling tugs at Koreans,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2011, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2011-jan-05-la-fg-south-korea-han-20110105-story.html>

<sup>241</sup> Sandra Kim, 256.

professionals as an example of a cultural syndrome—“clusters of symptoms and attributions that tend to co-occur among individuals in specific cultural groups, communities, or contexts”<sup>242</sup>—the condition has an especially high incidence rate amongst middle aged Korean and Korean-American women, whose symptoms typically include (among other things), chest pain, a “blocked or frustrated feeling,”<sup>243</sup> particularly in the solar plexus or throat; a feeling of sorrow welling up inside; insomnia; and, pertinently to Kang’s *The Vegetarian* especially, anorexia.<sup>244</sup> There is also often an aura of silence that attends the psychological symptoms of this condition, which medical professionals attribute to the stigmas around mental health issues that are especially pervasive in Korean society: “Hwa-Byung patients are more attuned to their physical symptoms (which are socially acceptable), rather than their psychological symptoms (which are not).”<sup>245</sup>

In literature by or about the diasporic Korean experience, then, the physical symptoms of hwabyung—and the accompanying silence around or unwillingness to speculate about their psychic origins—often become a critical shorthand for talking about han, a term which, as literary translators and Koreanists alike tend to overstate, “has no equivalent in English” (Chu 97). As often, (gendered) figures from Korea’s traumatic history—chief among them the comfort woman (위안부) or “American princess” (양공주)—emerge in these narratives as a marker of these unspeakable, or untranslatable histories, a thematic invocation of han that emerges as “an expression both of the

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<sup>242</sup> *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2013), 758.

<sup>243</sup> Jung-woo Kim, “화병의 진단” [“Diagnosis of Hwabyung”] *The Korean Journal of Stress Research* (스트레스研究) 12, Issue 1 (2004), 54.

<sup>244</sup> Jieun Lee, Amy Wachholtz, and Keum-Hyeon Choi, “A Review of the Korean Cultural Syndrome Hwa-Byung: Suggestions for Theory and Intervention,” *Asia Taepyongyang Sangdam Yongu* 4, Issue 1 (January 2014), 17.

<sup>245</sup> Lee et. al, “Review ... Cultural Syndrome Hwa-Byung,” 2.

experience of perpetual foreignness as well as the psychic impact of Korean history on individual lives.”<sup>246</sup>

More recent work on han has sought to decouple the term’s supposed untranslatability from its historical moorings in order to think through Korea’s broader affective connections with the postcolonial and post-traumatic. Hellen Moon, for example, argues that han “is transcultural, intercultural, and extant in all human communities,” and locates its particular resistance to translation within a “unique experience of suffering that in and of itself is always untranslatable, and that melancholy marks any colonial and postcolonial context.”<sup>247</sup> Similarly, in her writing on the historical emergence of han as a Korean cultural concept, Sandra Kim helpfully describes *han* as an “ethnonational translation”—a term that emerges out of a colonial context in which Japanese “colonial authorities, writers, scholars ... were simultaneously and contradictorily trying to both essentialize Koreans as different from Japanese, yet appeal to their similarities for peaceful assimilation into empire.”<sup>248</sup> The Japanese did this, Kim suggests, by both naturalizing Korea’s position as an inferior—and therefore naturally “tragic” or sorrowful—nation, and aestheticizing this inferiority through the “beauty of sorrow” discourse that emerged during this period to describe Korean artistic production.<sup>249</sup> In order to move away from theorizations of han that naturalize or pathologize its emergence within the Korean body (bodies) politic, Kim argues for a

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<sup>246</sup> Sandra Kim, 268. Grace Cho’s book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War* (2005) focuses on the Yanggongju and the Comfort Woman as haunting sociological figures; in literature, Nora Okja Keller’s *Comfort Woman* (1997) and Jane Jeong Troika *The Language of Blood* (2005) are representative examples.

<sup>247</sup> Hellen Moon, “Genealogy of the modern theological understanding of han,” *Pastoral Psychology* 63, no. 4 (2014), 420.

<sup>248</sup> Sandra Kim, 262.

<sup>249</sup> Sandra Kim, 259.

reconceptualization of the term that attends more robustly to the translational history of this Korean untranslatable. To this end, she writes:

Han is not uniquely Korean as an affect of postcolonial sorrow and mourning. Neither is han uniquely Korean in the sense of racial or biological essence. However I argue that a critical han must recognize how han is also absolutely uniquely Korean: it is a Korean word in which its current usage is a postcolonial translation of a Japanese colonial construct. Critical han aims to repeatedly emphasize how the term itself is embedded in a specific history that we should not forget. The word han carries within it a history of unmitigated collective traumas.<sup>250</sup>

That there is a risk involved in invoking certain versions of han that fail to take into account the complicated colonial conditions that led to its adoption as a cultural identifier can be gleaned in what is, to date, the only critical scholarly reading about *The Vegetarian* (and its translation scandal) in English. Writing for the interdisciplinary feminist studies journal *Hecate*, literary scholar and translator Sneja Gunew suggests—and rightly so—that Kang’s text offers a kind of limit test for the translatability of culturally-specific affective structures. Taking issue with the ways in which a putative affective “universality” becomes the ultimate endorsement for a foreign text translated into English, Gunew argues against the “universalization of affect in terms of the European psy disciplines” and suggests that a reading of Kang’s text through the lens of han offers a comment on this untranslatability.<sup>251</sup> (8). Limited to sources in English in constructing her theorization of han, however—and seemingly unwilling to collaborate with a native

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<sup>250</sup> Sandra Kim, 274. Nancy Abelman’s reading of han in *Echoes of the Past, Epics of Dissent: a Korean Social Movement* (1996) takes a similarly translational approach to understanding the term. She writes: “I am interested in han not as an essential element of “Korean culture” but rather as an idiomatic convention employed in particular narratives of mobilization. It makes room for a concept of memory that is not defined by temporally bounded straight lines and the drawing of historical or political lineages but, rather, by a fragmented pastiche. In conjunction, then, han also allows for corresponding notions of conscientization whereby both the genealogical “real” memory of individual biographies and the “fragmentary memory” of the past can politicize. In a single word, “han” connotes both the collective and the individual genealogical senses of the hardship of historical experience. In implying the accumulated anger of resentment born of such experience, it relaxes the temporal and geographic patchwork of passive and active, resistance and nonresistance—by not forcing the distinction (37).

<sup>251</sup> Sneja Gunew, “Excess of Affect: in Translation,” *Hecate: A Women’s Interdisciplinary Journal*, Vo. 42, No.2 (2016), 8.

Korean speaker in constructing her critique—Gunew’s understanding of han elides the critical colonial contexts that Kim so poignantly advocates for in her work. In so doing, her analysis of *The Vegetarian*—in figuring Yeong-hye as a pat victim of the South Korean patriarchy—ends up replicating the very culturally-insensitive reading she purports to critique.<sup>252</sup>

Despite these oversights, Gunew’s suggestion that *The Vegetarian* can be read as a parable for the exigencies of translating cultural affect is a generative one. In many ways, the ideas she raises in her essay dovetail with the central conceit of Theresa Brennan’s influential text, *The Transmission of Affect*, which takes as its critical starting point the fact that affect theory is predicated on a Eurocentric notion of “affective self-containment.” Brennan suggests that this assumption raises important questions about how cultural mores might impact the translatability (or transmission, to use her term) of affect amongst individuals or groups in differently situated national, cultural, or linguistic contexts. She writes:

The fact is that the taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking, the last outpost of the subject’s belief in the superiority of its own worldview over that of other cultures. Critics who have no difficulty with, if they do not actively endorse, the idea that progress is a modernist and Western myth are nonetheless blind to the way that non-Western as well as premodern, preindustrial cultures assume that the person is not affectively contained ... But while it is recognized freely that individualism is a historical and cultural product, the idea that affective self-containment is also a production is resisted.<sup>253</sup>

Though Brennan does not use the language of translation in this description per se, I would argue that her project’s overarching concerns around iterability and transmission across discrete (bodily) systems renders it largely compatible with translational approaches to comparative literature studies—a sentiment supported by the (as yet very

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<sup>252</sup> Perhaps most problematically, Gunew openly acknowledges her reliance on wikipedia to construct her critical framing of the concept.

<sup>253</sup> Theresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.

small) body of scholarship devoted to the study of affect in a comparative literature frame.<sup>254</sup> Drawing on Sandra Kim's idea of "critical han"—which holds in tension the translational origins of this term as well as its potential to be mistranslated—I turn now to a reading of the figurations of han in the first book of *The Vegetarian*, paying particular attention to the ways in which the text disrupts conventional understandings of the term that elide its historical specificity.

### Critical Han and the Shape of Silence(s) in *The Vegetarian*

Though the Man Booker win has all but cemented *The Vegetarian's* status as a novel, it is important to note that Kang's text was originally published in serial form. The three novellas that comprise the book—"The Vegetarian," "Mongolian Mark," and "Flaming Trees," respectively—are ostensibly about the titular vegetarian Yeong-hye, but narrated entirely by members of her immediate family: her husband, her brother-in-law, and her sister, In-hye (in that order). With the exception of several dream-sequences in the first novella, Yeong-hye's voice is largely absent from the text itself, and in the rare instances where she is given a voice, she is largely ignored. Though this poses certain interpretive challenges to the reader, Kang appears to offer a clue as to how to read this character-in-absentia in the first novella, in a passing reference to Yeong-hye's work history. Yeong-hye, we are told, first worked "as an assistant instructor at the computer graphics college she'd attended for a year, and was subcontracted by a manwha<sup>255</sup> publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles, which she could do from home."<sup>256</sup> This image—of a kind of

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<sup>254</sup> S. Shankar makes a similar point in his essay, "The Languages of Love: An Essay on Translation and Affect," *Comparative Literature* 69, no. 1 (2017), 71. "Such work would require knowledge of the relevant languages and cultures, but the daunting prospect of such work might also be mitigated by an understanding of translation as a method—for to think of translation as a method is to regard it as providing principles for the formulation of a research question, for the accumulation of data in response to that question, and for the setting forth of hypothetical conclusion."

<sup>255</sup> Manwha (만화) is the Korean word for comics.

<sup>256</sup> Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, trans. Deborah Smith (London: Portobello Books, 2015), 4. Emphasis my own.

rhetorical or narrative filling-in—is a useful model for thinking through the rhetorical position one is interpellated into as a reader of *The Vegetarian*. Each novella offers an account of Yeong-hye and her experiences of physical and sexual violence, but they are all articulated, crucially, at a rhetorical remove. As such, the novel asks us to consider what empathy—and its attendant demands of witnessing and speaking out—might mean, or look like, when faced with such abstraction.

The first novella, “The Vegetarian,” situates Kang’s narrative firmly within the realm of the domestic—a space overwritten, in Kang’s framing, with an air of the ordinary or the banal. “Before my wife turned vegetarian,” Yeong-hye’s husband, referred to simply as Mr. Cheong, observes, “I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.”<sup>257</sup> Though readers might bristle at this opening description, Yeong-hye’s husband praises her ordinariness, which he sees as a complement to his tendency to take the “middle course in life.”<sup>258</sup> In these opening lines, Kang presents an image of a marriage of efficiency, if one marked by tensions between traditional Korean gender roles and modern individualism: Yeong-hye does all of the cooking and cleaning, for instance, but she also holds a job and earns her own income. In her spare time she pursues a life of the mind, reading books that her husband describes as “so dull I could barely bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers.”<sup>259</sup> Her husband’s utter lack of ambition, by contrast, is out of place with what we might consider the traditional Korean patriarchy; he prefers to “diligently carry[...] out [his] allotted tasks at a company whose small size meant they would value [his] unremarkable skills” rather than strive for a more lucrative position that might advance his social status or provide a more

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<sup>257</sup> Han Kang, *The Vegetarian*, 3.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>259</sup> Kang, 5.

comfortable life for his family.<sup>260</sup> This performance of marital harmony has also reached a kind of critical standstill: childless and on the edge of being too old to conceive, the question of whether or not they will grow their family—whether or not, as he puts it, “I would ever hear the reassuring sound of a child gurgling ‘dada’”—looms large.<sup>261</sup>

As the husband’s opening line suggests, it is Yeong-hye’s abrupt turn to vegetarianism that ultimately tips the scales of balance in this precarious domestic arrangement, though the fallout is not nearly as swift as one might think. When Mr. Cheong first discovers his wife throwing out all of the animal products from the home—standing in front of the refrigerator “almost as if she were some kind of ghost”—his initial reaction is not one of concern for her psychological well-being, but of how this sudden break in their domestic routine signifies an unsettling disobedience on her part.<sup>262</sup> As far as he is concerned, “the only reasonable grounds for altering one’s eating habits were the desire to lose weight, an attempt to alleviate certain physical ailments, being possessed by an evil spirit, or having your sleep disturbed by indigestion,” and “it was nothing but sheer obstinacy for a wife to go against her husband’s wishes as mine had done.”<sup>263</sup> Though Yeong-hye offers a reason for this shift—“I had a dream,” she repeatedly insists—her husband makes it clear that he has no interest in trying to understand her motivations, declaring “I never enquired as to the nature of this dream” shortly after she first proffers this explanation.<sup>264</sup> And while he is dismayed by his wife’s sudden shift in dietary choices—a shift accompanied by a refusal to wear appropriate, or appropriately

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<sup>260</sup> Kang, 4. Both Yeong-hye and her sister In-hye’s marital arrangements present different models of shifting gender roles within the Korean family unit in the post IMF climate. For more on this, see Kim Seung-kyung’s article “Confucian Patriarchy Reexamined: Korean Families and the IMF Economic Crisis” (*The Good Society*, Vol.11, Issue 3, 2002).

<sup>261</sup> Kang, 6.

<sup>262</sup> Kang, 7.

<sup>263</sup> Kang, 14.

<sup>264</sup> Kang, 17.

feminine, clothing—he tolerates, and even accepts it, in private. He abides her rational-choice argument for eating a daily meatless meal at home, and even appears underwhelmed by her refusal to have sex with him—a refusal prompted, it seems, by her claim that his body “smells too much like meat.”<sup>265</sup>

The turning point occurs when Yeong-hye’s obstinacy—her newfound bodily willfulness or resistance—becomes an embarrassment to her husband in public. After bringing Yeong-hye to an important work-related dinner, Mr. Cheong suffers a series of humiliations, which begin with his realization that she has neglected to wear a bra to the function.<sup>266</sup> This problematic bodily display is compounded by Yeong-hye’s bizarre explication of her vegetarianism (the same “I had a dream” refrain) and refusal to entertain questions about her diet from her husband’s colleagues. Though Mr. Cheong is eventually able to produce a socially-justifiable explanation for her behavior—“for a long time my wife used to suffer from gastroenteritis, which was so acute that it disturbed her sleep, you see. A dietician advised her to give up meat, and her symptoms got a lot better after that”—the damage has been done, and the couple are gradually edged out of the dinnertime conversation.<sup>267</sup> Perhaps most damningly, Yeong-hye refuses to apologize or offer a penitential countenance to her fellow dinner companions, instead offering—to her husband’s horror—a blank and socially inappropriate stare:

the demure, apologetic smile which was the only reasonable response never came, and without even having the grace to look embarrassed, my wife stared baldly at my boss’s wife. That stare appalled everyone present. Did she not even recognize the situation for what it was? Was it possible that she hadn’t grasped the status of the elegant middle-aged woman facing her? What shadowy recesses lurked in her mind, what secrets I’d never suspected? In that moment, she was utterly unknowable.<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Ibid.

<sup>266</sup> Kang, 21.

<sup>267</sup> Kang, 24.

<sup>268</sup> Kang, 25.

In this instance, Yeong-hye's unknowability is yoked to her refusal to comport herself according to Korean societal expectations. Vegetarianism in East Asia is far less studied and practiced than it is in the west, despite a long-established Buddhist tradition of abstaining from meat, and social psychologists have suggested that this has largely to do with the collectivist leanings that govern social expectation in these countries.<sup>269</sup> Where western vegetarianism is typically framed as an individualist ethical choice, in East Asian countries like Korea, "an individual is construed as a relational being who is interdependent with others, and whose behavior is determined, contingent on, and organized by the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship"<sup>270</sup> Korean sociologist Chung Soo-bok has suggested, in this vein, that Korea's particular collectivist leanings and customs are nowhere more visible than they are at the dinner table.<sup>271</sup> Read this way, Yeong-hye's decision not to eat meat emerges as less problematic than her refusal to consider how her dietary choices—and the way she explains, or fails to explain, them—might disrupt the group's dynamic.<sup>272</sup> Her "utterly unknowable" countenance is signalled by her refusal to perform the role of dutiful wife in public—a decision that results, fatally, in her husband's public emasculation.

It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that Yeong-hye's public display of feminized "obstinacy" draws the specific ire of the men in her immediate family, culminating in violent encounters with both her husband and her father. The first of these instances

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<sup>269</sup> Tae-bum Yoo and In-jin Yoon, "Becoming a Vegetarian in Korea: *The Sociocultural Implications of Vegetarian Diets in Korean Society*," *Korea Journal* 55, no. 4(winter 2015), 11-135.

<sup>270</sup> Yoo and Yoon, "Vegetarian in Korea," 116.

<sup>271</sup> Chung, quoted in Yoo and Yoon, 117.

<sup>272</sup> Another Korean untranslatable is of import here: *nunchi* (눈치), which refers to the ability to sense others' emotions or to "read the room." *Naver* Korean to English dictionary defines *nunchi* as "sense," or "wits," but this does not quite capture it; Lyudmila Mikheesku gives a nice gloss of this term and the translational challenges it poses (into both English and Russian) in an online essay, "Koreans' Way of Survival: *Nunchi* (눈치)," *Korea.net*, 2016, <http://www.korea.net/NewsFocus/Column/view?articleId=138288>.

occurs shortly after Yeong-hye's refusal to eat meat at the company dinner: furious and still feeling the sting of public emasculation, her husband comes home after a night of drinking and rapes her in their bed. The language he uses to describe the attack—or, more aptly, to rationalize it—is worth parsing in detail here:

I grabbed hold of my wife and pushed her to the floor. Pinning down her struggling arms and tugging off her trousers, I became unexpectedly aroused. She put up a surprisingly strong resistance and, spitting out vulgar curses all the while, it took me three attempts before I managed to insert myself successfully. Once that had happened, she lay there in the dark staring up at the ceiling, her face blank, as though she were a 'comfort woman' dragged in against her will, and I was the Japanese soldier demanding her services ... by the time I returned to bed she was lying there with her eyes closed as if nothing had happened, or as though everything had somehow sorted itself out during the time I'd spent washing myself.<sup>273</sup>

In presenting us with this scene of extraordinary violence—and narrating it with such a flat and unemotive affect—Kang asks us to think about the iterability or translatability of a term like *han*, which is more fraught with internal contradictions than popular definitions might allow. How, she asks, are we to read the invocation of Japanese colonialism and martial masculine violence, deracinated from its historical context and erupting, seemingly from out of nowhere, into this scene of spousal rape set in our contemporary moment? What, too, does it mean that Mr. Cheong aligns himself with Korea's primary historical aggressor, without any seeming remorse? And what does this scene suggest about how sexual violence against women gets codified—remembered, acknowledged, defended—along a historical continuum?

On the one hand, this reference to comfort women works, as I have suggested, as a kind of metonym for *han* in its popular understandings—a kind of choked silence rooted in the traumatic history of a nation. But the spectral appearance of this figure is also worthy of note. In her writing on the figuration of haunting in literary and cultural

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<sup>273</sup> Kang, 31.

productions, sociologist Avery Gordon suggests that ghosts are not merely the image of a person (or persons) long departed, but indicative of a larger and more complexly imbricated historical narrative whose persistent bearing on the present moment has gone unnoticed for far too long. Her description of this structural haunting, though lengthy, is of import here and worth quoting in full:

If haunting describes how that which appears to be not there is often a seething presence, acting on and often meddling with taken-for-granted realities, the ghost is just the sign, or the empirical evidence if you like, that tells you a haunting is taking place. The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing figure, but *a social figure*, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or the apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or what is happening. Being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but transformative recognition.<sup>274</sup>

Read this way, the comfort woman—in her emergence as a kind of socio-spectral figure—becomes a way of enabling Yeong-hye to speak in the absence of any sort of real voice. She disrupts, in other words, the idea that Yeong-hye's silence means consent, and gestures to a much longer history of women being exploited and voiceless. Like the comfort women whose stories went unspoken for decades—and even now, are denied legitimacy by the historical perpetrator of these crimes—the battered and abused woman is taken for granted, hidden in plain sight.<sup>275</sup> That the husband envisions himself in the place of the Japanese imperial soldier is likewise significant, inviting—in an extremely uneasy and self-conscious way—a consideration of how the sexual enslavement of

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<sup>274</sup> Kang, 8. Emphasis my own.

<sup>275</sup> For a gloss of the Comfort Woman redress movement in Korea (and elsewhere), see Sarah Chunghee Soh, "The Korean 'Comfort Women': Movement for Redress," *Asian Survey* Vol. 36, No. 12 (Dec., 1996), pp. 1226-1240.

Korean women during the period of occupation might, for example, have been aided by the complicity of Korean men.<sup>276</sup>

Yeong-hye's dream sequences in the first novella further reinforce this interweaving between what we might call two drastically different scales, or histories, of violence: one much longer, and nationally-felt; the other the purview of the individual, meted out in the day-to-day. Though most of Yeong-hye's dreams are the stuff of pure grotesque abstraction—dark forests, bleeding bellies, howling animals—one sequence in particular locates the origin story for these images in Yeong-hye's traumatic childhood. Recalling an episode in which her abusive father runs over a dog which is later cooked and served to the family for dinner, Yeong-hye suddenly recognizes the connection between the suffering of animals—who are variously abused and consumed on a daily basis—and her own suffering at the hands of her violent father. She imagines the bodies of animals agglutinating inside of her and feels anguish at her participation within a system of exploitation that she did not recognize before:

*Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny, and though the physical remnants were excreted, their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides.*<sup>277</sup>

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that what Yeong-hye imagines to be “the lives of animals [she] ate” effectively resemble the physical symptoms of han (or hwabyung), a generalized condition thought to affect all Koreans: pain in her chest, “something ... stuck in [her] solar plexus,” a choked feeling (ibid). Aligning these symptoms of han with a particular form of feminine violence, then, Kang calls attention

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<sup>276</sup> Grace Cho's excellent book *Haunting the Korean Diaspora: Shame and Secrecy in the Forgotten War* (2008), attends to these complexities in greater detail than the scope of this chapter allows.

<sup>277</sup> Kang, 49.

to the ways in which the traumatic histor(ies) this term evokes signify differently across gendered lines.

If the spectral emergence of the comfort woman in this scene works to trouble a generalizing definition of han along the axis of gender, the text also resists—through a similarly ghostly figure—the idea that the source of han is “Korea’s position as a vulnerable peninsula, which purportedly has subjected it to a long history of foreign invasions and colonisation.”<sup>278</sup> (S.Kim 276). This haunting history, which annexes Korea’s own participation in violent conflicts abroad, emerges in a conversation between Mr. Cheong and Yeong-hye’s father, whom he has contacted to inform of Yeong-hye’s increasingly erratic behavior. Mr. Cheong is surprised to hear his father-in-law—a veteran of the Vietnam war, we learn in this conversation—express regret over his daughter’s actions. “It shocked me to hear this patriarchal man apologize,” Mr. Cheong says, because

in the five years I’d known him, I’d never once heard such words pass his lips. Shame and empathy just didn’t suit him. He never tired of boasting about having received the Order of Military Merit for serving in Vietnam, and not only was his voice extremely loud, it was the voice of a man with extremely fixed ideas. *I myself, in Vietnam...seven Vietcong...* as his son-in-law, I was only too familiar with the beginning of his monologue. According to my wife, he had whipped her over the calves until she was eighteen years old.<sup>279</sup>

Two important things emerge out of this brief conversation. In referencing South Korea’s military involvement in Vietnam, Kang gestures to an aspect of South Korean history frequently elided in western accounts of the conflict—the nearly 50,000 South Korean soldiers who were deployed, under the Park Chung-hee government, to rural areas of the country to fight the Viet Cong. Allied closely with the US forces under the command of the Lyndon B. Johnson government, the South Korean army played a pivotal role in two

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<sup>278</sup> Sandra Kim, 276.

<sup>279</sup> Kang, 29.

of the deadliest battles of the Vietnam War, at Ha My and My Lai, respectively—an irony not lost on historians of the Korean and Vietnam Wars, whose observation of the similarities between the conflicts are well-documented.<sup>280</sup> (Kwon 2017).<sup>281</sup> And while some recent attempts at redress between these nations have been made—as when, most notably, then recently-elected South Korean President Moon Jae-in spoke of South Korea’s “debt of heart to Vietnam”—the imbrication of both countries’ national economies have impeded any efforts toward true reconciliation.<sup>282</sup>

This passage also works to situate Korean patriarchal violence in relation to what Heonik Kwon calls “the ghosts of war,” placing Yeong-hye’s history of abuse at the hands of her father—of which “whipp[ings] ... over the calves” only scratches the surface—within the much longer history of Korea’s imperial and martial encounters. The implicit reference to Park Chung-hee’s military efforts also serves as crucial contextualization for Yeong-hye’s metamorphosis over the course of the following novellas. In aiming to become a plant—Yeong-hye’s ultimate goal in refusing to eat meat and, eventually, refusing to eat altogether—she draws on a distinctly literary tradition of passive resistance and nonviolence in Korea.

Kang has spoken at length in interviews about a quote from great modernist poet Yi Sang that would serve as the inspiration for *The Vegetarian*: “I think that humans should be plants.” Kang took this phrase, jotted in the Korean script *hangul* banned under Japanese colonial rule (and thus a kind of translational counterpoetic gesture in its own

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<sup>280</sup> Heonik Kwan, “Vietnam’s South Korean Ghosts” *The New York Times*, July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/opinion/vietnam-war-south-korea.html>.

<sup>281</sup> For more on South Korean involvement in the Vietnam War, see Kwon; Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun: a Modern History* (New York: Norton, 1997); and in a literary context, Daniel Kim and Viet Nguyen, “The Literature of the Korean War and the Vietnam War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Asian-American Literature* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015).

<sup>282</sup> Ha-young Choi, “Moon’s Apology Ignored in Vietnam,” *The Korea Times*, 2017. [https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/11/120\\_239305.html](https://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/nation/2017/11/120_239305.html)

right) to be an inward-turning, non-violent response to the violence of colonialism. The phrase obsessed her for years, she says, and she wanted to literalize this metaphor, to recast it for the contemporary moment.”<sup>283</sup> Her first attempt, the short story “Fruits of my Woman” (2000), is a magical-realist tale of a man who comes home one day to find his wife has become a plant. After moving her to a pot, watering her, and taking care of her, the story culminates with the question of whether or not the wife’s seeds will bloom in the spring. Immediately after publishing the story, Kang knew she wanted to write it again from a different perspective, and thought for years on how to approach the narrative that would end up being *The Vegetarian*. “From the very first page,” she observes, “*The Vegetarian* came out very dark and different.”<sup>284</sup> (K. Lee, 2016).

If *The Vegetarian*’s constitutive darkness inheres, as I have suggested, in the specters of critical han that punctuate the text, then the Yi Sang quote serves as an important structural haunting as well, one that asks whether such a metamorphosis—a turning-inward or opting out of the violence of everyday life—is a viable form of resistance. This is particularly the case in the second and third novellas, “Mongolian Mark,” and “Flaming Trees,” which center broadly on the themes of sexual consent and female silence. Picking up nearly a year after the violent family intervention that closes “The Vegetarian”—in which Yeong-hye slits her wrists after being force-fed a piece of meat—“Mongolian Mark” is narrated by Yeong-hye’s unnamed artist brother-in-law, who, Kang suggests, is at a turning point in his career. He has a vision for a new video project, which features faceless figures painted with flowers and plants having sex, and

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<sup>283</sup> Hae-hyeon Bak, “I Wrote the Story of a Human Wanting To Live Like a Plant.” [in Korean] Interview with Han Kang, by Bak Hae-hyeon, *chosŏn ilbo*, 2008.

<sup>284</sup> Krys Lee, “Violence and being human: an interview with Han Kang,” *World Literature Today*, May 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2016/may/violence-and-being-human-conversation-han-kang-krys-lee>

a chance conversation with his wife about their son's Mongolian mark—during which it is revealed that Yeong-hye still has this birthmark—convinces him that his sister-in-law should feature in the project. “The fact that his sister-in-law still had a Mongolian mark on her buttocks became inexplicably bound up with the image of men and women having sex,” he reasons, and “the causality linking these things was so clear, so obvious, as to be somehow beyond comprehension ... [that] it became etched in his mind.”<sup>285</sup>

The brother-in-law manages to persuade Yeong-hye to participate in the project, but their first attempt at a video is thwarted when the artist he has recruited to perform with Yeong-hye refuses to have actual (non-simulated) intercourse with her. Because this “proxy projection of lust is actually [just] a materialization of the artist's own uncontrollable lust for Yeong-hye,” the brother-in-law—predictably—ends up having sex with Yeong-hye himself.<sup>286</sup> After discovering the video of her husband with her sister, In-hye calls the police, and the novella ends in a spectacular display of inward-looking violence, with the husband fantasizing about suicide: “he had to rush out onto the veranda, now, and throw himself over the railing against which she was leaning. He would fall down three floors and smash his head to pieces. It was the only way. The only way to make a clean end of all this.”<sup>287</sup> The couple divorce, and it is ever-responsible In-hye who is left to look after the couple's young son and her ailing sister.

Gunew has suggested that the paratextual commentary on *The Vegetarian's* “eroticism”—an aesthetic, and largely positive, framing of the novel's depictions of sex—elides the troubling ways in which “Yeong-hye's own complicity in her sexualization remains ambiguous.” Was she taken advantage of “while in a mentally disabled state,”

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<sup>285</sup> Kang, 59.

<sup>286</sup> Gunew, “Excess of Affect,” 10.

<sup>287</sup> Kang, 119.

Gunew wonders, “or was she using sexual intercourse as a way to reach for another form of life?”<sup>288</sup> Pointing to a passage in which the brother-in-law recognizes Yeong-hye’s body as displaying a kind of willfulness or resistance in its prone posture—“it was the body of a beautiful young woman, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was *the very life her body represented*”<sup>289</sup>—Gunew reads this evacuation of desire from Yeong-hye’s body as evidence of a yearning for “another form of life,” perhaps the plant-life that Yi-Sang saw as an alternative to violence experienced under the conditions of colonialism.<sup>290</sup>

But to frame Yeong-hye’s dubious sexual agency as a function of her mental state—pathologizing her, as it were—is to miss the more subtle and insidious ways that sexual violence structures the novel. Kang suggests that violence against women is much more pervasive, and difficult to see, than popular theorizations may suggest. Consider the way Yeong-hye’s sexual traumas are mirrored in the traumatic experiences of her sister In-hye, a “picture of responsible compassion” whose rationality and composure are emphasized throughout the text.<sup>291</sup> From the outset, the sisters are relentlessly compared to one another, from observations on their appearance—“In-hye ... resembled my wife quite closely, but her eyes were larger and prettier, and overall she was much more feminine,”<sup>292</sup> offers Mr. Cheong early on in the text—to criticisms even about their positive qualities (the brother-in-law finds, for example, In-hye’s “patience and desire to do the right thing ... stifling”).<sup>293</sup> The ambiguous sexual encounter between Yeong-hye

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<sup>288</sup> Gunew, 11.

<sup>289</sup> Kang, 85.

<sup>290</sup> Gunew 11. Emphasis my own.

<sup>291</sup> Kang, 65.

<sup>292</sup> Kang, 27.

<sup>293</sup> Kang, 98.

and her brother-in-law has its double, too, in a dubious exchange between the brother-in-law and In-hye. Though In-hye's version of events only emerges in the final novella, the husband's "hazy" recollection of the night in question suggests that the sex was less than consensual: "*I'm scared*, she'd muttered, turned away from him. No, it wasn't that. *You're scaring me*. At that point he was already slipping into a death-like sleep, so he couldn't be sure if those words had really passed his wife's lips. She might have lain there sobbing for hours in the darkness. He didn't know."<sup>294</sup>

The rhetorical maneuvering In-hye's husband does here—through which he manages to figure himself as a passive victim in "death-like sleep" whilst alluding, at the same time, to something far more sinister—recalls what Barbara Johnson calls the "male two-step"<sup>295</sup> of patriarchal power, which hinges on "a male appropriation of female muteness as [an] aesthetic trophy, accompanied by an elision of sexual violence."<sup>296</sup> (153, 137). And while In-hye's passive reaction to this abuse might seem like a testament to her ability to absorb physical and psychological pain, her recollection of this event months later suggests that this seemingly nonviolent, inward-turning approach might carry similarly destructive, if less immediately visible, long-term consequences:

Those words had run through her semi-conscious mind again and again. Still half asleep, she'd managed to get through it by thinking to herself that it was all right, it would just be this one time, it would be over soon, she could put up with it. The pain and shame had been washed away by the deep, exhausted sleep she slipped into immediately afterwards. And yet, at the breakfast table, she would all of a sudden find herself wanting to stab herself in the eyes with her chopsticks, or pour the boiling water from the kettle over her head.<sup>297</sup>

This startling eruption of violence into the scene of the everyday suggests the limitations of Yi's approach to withstanding conditions of sustained abuse. Interestingly, while both

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<sup>294</sup> Kang, 82.

<sup>295</sup> Barbara Johnson, *The Feminist Difference: Literature, Psychoanalysis, Race, and Gender* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 153.

<sup>296</sup> Johnson, *The Feminist Difference*, 137.

<sup>297</sup> Kang, 164.

sisters attempt to “opt out” of life in the way that Yi advocates—by refusing to engage with or react to the violent structures and systems that govern everyday life—only Yeong-hye’s behavior, which bizarrely literalizes this plant-metamorphosis aspiration, is deemed problematic. But this revelation comes too late for In-hye, who recognizes, towards the end of Yeong-hye’s decline, that her own identity as the “responsible” sister derives not from an innate sense of altruism, but from a desire for self-preservation. The question Yeong-hye utters to her on her deathbed—“why, is it such a bad thing to die?”—prompts In-hye to consider the sense of superiority she felt towards her sister growing up:

As the eldest daughter, In-hye had been the one who took over from their exhausted mother and made a broth for her father to wash the liquor down, and so he’d always taken a certain care in his dealings with her. Only Yeong-hye, docile and naive, had been unable to deflect their father’s temper or put up any form of resistance. Instead, she merely absorbed all of her suffering inside her, deep in the marrow of her bones.<sup>298</sup>

Read this way, Kang suggests, In-hye’s drive towards responsibility and caregiving emerges not as a sign of maturity but of cowardice—“a survival tactic,” In-hye admits.<sup>299</sup>

Kang’s elision of these two sisters through their sexual violation and their silence dilates the possibility of a reparative ending to this violent trilogy, with Yeong-hye finally in outpatient care and In-hye free from her husband and the “self-inflicted” unhappiness of their marriage.<sup>300</sup> Yeong-hye’s condition has worsened considerably, however; no longer content to avoid meat, she refuses food altogether, telling her sister ““I don’t need to eat, not now. I can live without it. All I need is sunlight,”” pushing Yi Sang’s plant metamorphosis example to its most literal extreme.<sup>301</sup> Yeong-hye’s desire to become a plant—to “shuck off the human,”<sup>302</sup> as it were—can be seen as a kind of escapist gesture,

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<sup>298</sup> Kang, 157.

<sup>299</sup> Kang, 158.

<sup>300</sup> Kang, 161.

<sup>301</sup> Kang, 154.

<sup>302</sup> Kang, 179.

an attempt to “let fall the slender thread which had kept her connected with everyday (human) life” in order to forget the traumas she has suffered.<sup>303</sup> This idea—of the redemptive power that might inhere in a “return” to nature—is especially common in early ecofeminist theory, which tends to frame a “truly sick society ... of alienated relationships all linked to a rationalization that separates ‘man’ from nature,” as the source of all environmental, colonial, and patriarchal violence and which posits, further, that “the rape of the earth, in all its forms [is] a metaphor for the rape of a woman, in all its guises.”<sup>304</sup>

*The Vegetarian* ultimately suggests, however, that an ecofeminist return to nature—held out in the intimation of the sisters’ communion at the end of the novel—fails to deliver on these redemptive promises in the same way that Yi’s call for plantlike resistance does. In-hye’s recognition of her own history of trauma and abuse comes too late, and rather than bring them closer together, this realization leaves her feeling more estranged from her sister than ever: “somehow—not suddenly, but over a period of time—[Yeong-hye] became difficult to read. So difficult that there were times when she seemed like a total stranger,” she observes.<sup>305</sup> In refusing to offer a facile solution to the histories of violence that *The Vegetarian* explores, then, Kang refuses to translate the novel’s politics into easily identifiable or palatable terms: though she draws on concepts from both Korean and western literary contexts—the figure of the madwoman, the cultural affect of han, forms of environmental resistance—the specters of history and the episodes of violence that punctuate the text refuse to be assimilated into a particular generic tradition. The untranslatables and expressive silences that comprise *The*

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<sup>303</sup> Kang, 167.

<sup>304</sup> Judith Plant, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (New Society Publishers, 1989), 5.

<sup>305</sup> Kang, 129.

*Vegetarian's* affective structure, in other words, serve as a counterweight to the criticism that would seeks to excavate a "right" or "definitive" interpretation of the novel through its translational crossings. Calling our attention instead to the historical trace, or the "idiom [that] does not go over," Kang emphasizes the importance of untranslatables to any project that takes historical violence as its object of inquiry, particularly—or especially—when that project encompasses a transnational frame.<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> Spivak, "Translating into English," 100.

### Coda: on the Translational Futures of Transpacific Discourse

Our contemporary Moby-Dick in fact has a very different and even benign cute look. The great leviathan has become *Hello, Kitty*.

-- Karen Tei Yamashita, "Call me Ishimaru"

When Karen Tei Yamashita suggested, during a conference for the Melville Society of Japan in early 2016, that the white whale of Melville's opus had found new expression in the Japanimation figure of Hello Kitty, she aimed to draw attention to the shifting shape of the Manifest Destiny narrative that has haunted literary depictions of the Pacific since the publication of *Moby Dick* in 1851. The "myth and symbol of *Moby-Dick* has moved forward in time," she observes; from Godzilla during the years of nuclear panic and the Cold War to Star Trek Enterprise during the closing years of the twentieth century, the players and frontier of this pacific narrative may have changed, but its essential concerns of human and natural power, expansion, and exploitation remain unnervingly the same.<sup>307</sup> Hello Kitty is an apt metaphor for the future-present of the transpacific narrative, she suggests, because its benign cuteness serves a masking function, circulating in the western world as a sign of Japan's beauty and whimsy while masking other progresses—namely in the realms of Artificial Intelligence and nuclear technology—that threaten to transform the planet and shift the bounds of what we think of as "human."

Yamashita's reading of Hello Kitty emerges out of research for her latest book, *Letters to Memory* (2017)—a text which examines, among other things, the transnational and transcultural implications of Ruth Benedict's 1946 anthropological study *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword: Patterns of Japanese Culture*. Benedict's project was commissioned by the Office of War Information during the Second World War, and sought to predict Japan's wartime activity through inferences about Japanese culture and

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<sup>307</sup> Karen Tei Yamashita, "Call me Ishimaru," *Leviathan* 18, No.1 (March 2016), 65.

mythology. Benedict, unsurprisingly, did not speak or read Japanese, and relied exclusively on translated texts and interviews with a lone bilingual kibeï, Robert Hashima, to produce the work.<sup>308</sup> But despite the deeply problematic ways in which this material was sourced, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* became incredibly popular in Japan and important to Japanese self-conception after the second world war.<sup>309</sup> Yamashita herself remembers the book being housed in her Japanese-American family's library and believing it to be "the bible about what it meant to be Japanese, like samurai: beautiful and violent with intricate categories of duty, obligation, and shame." It wasn't until she visited and lived in Japan herself as a young adult that she considered the fact that Benedict's work was as much "literary criticism and fiction" as it was a cultural anthropological study, and that its presentation of an authoritative "history" of Japanese culture—at once starkly beautiful and grotesquely violent—to the Japanese was itself a form of colonization, one that Japan then internalized.

For Yamashita, the discovery of the translational origins of Benedict's text prompted a reconsideration of the ways in which histories—both national and individual—come to be codified and assimilated as fact. "We are haunted with ideas and cultural assumptions that seem to automatically come with our bodies and memories, unconsciously or innocently imposed on us," she writes, and reckoning with the translational underpinnings of these histories "[forces] us to organize the way we think about this history we save and collect."<sup>310</sup> As Yamashita worked to recuperate Hashima from the archives, she was surprised to find other similarly-marginalized translator-

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<sup>308</sup> "Kibeï" was a term used during World War Two to refer to a Japanese Americans who studied in Japan before returning to the United States.

<sup>309</sup> For more on this dynamic, see Sonia Ryang's article, "'Chrysanthemum's Strange Life: Ruth Benedict in Postwar Japan' (2004), as well as the essays in the special issue of *Dialectical Anthropology* (Vol. 24, issue 2, 1999) devoted to the topic of Benedict's text.

<sup>310</sup> Yamashita, "Call me Ishimaru," 68.

figures—both Japanese American and Kibei—hovering in the margins. To cite but one example, the government-funded Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study (JERS)—a controversial WWII-era project that notoriously characterized Japanese Americans living internment camps as either “Salvage,” “Spoilage,” or “Residue”—was made largely possible through the research efforts of an Issei writer, Richard Nishimoto, who wrote two books on the subject.<sup>311</sup> Read against the genealogical linkage between Hello Kitty and Moby Dick, Yamashita’s archival discoveries reflect two signal aspects of transpacific knowledge production that *Translational Futures* has sought to center. The first is how understanding the Pacific as a site for environmental encounters opens up space for new avenues of critique across linguistic, national, and species lines. Though the “turn” towards the Pacific is increasingly construed in ecocritical terms, this framing is—as the historical entanglements and disjunctures in both Yamashita’s archive and mine show—hardly new.<sup>312</sup> The second, related point has to do with the way that translation plays a crucial and overlooked role in the way that (environmental) violence is rendered or distorted across a range of writerly genres, from literary criticism and fiction to anthropological critique. The history of the Pacific is, after all, a history of violence between (East) Asia and North America, one marked not only by prolonged periods of military combat and nuclear warfare but by forms of textual and ideological colonization like Benedict’s study.

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<sup>311</sup> Per Yamashita: “‘Salvage’ are those Japanese Americans who were able to leave camp before the ending of the war to assimilate into American society and continue their lives; ‘Spoilage’ are those Japanese Americans who rejected American society and chose repatriation and imprisonment at Tule Lake prison camp; and finally ‘Residue’ (the topic of a book that was never written) are those Japanese Americans who were left at camp until the war’s end and then finally tossed out of camp to fend for themselves” (69). Tellingly, while “Salvage” and “Spoilage” were turned into books, “Residue” was left unwritten. For more on Nishimoto, see the biography at Densho encyclopedia, a web archive devoted to Japanese American narratives from WWII: [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Richard\\_S.\\_Nishimoto/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Richard_S._Nishimoto/)

<sup>312</sup> See Rob Wilson’s recent essay, “Toward an Ecopoetics of Oceania: Worlding the Asia Pacific Region as Space Time Ecumene” in Yuan Shu and Donald E. Pease eds, *American Studies as Transnational Practice: Turning Toward the Transpacific* (NH: Dartmouth UP, 2015) as a representative example.

To read for translation in the way that the authors gathered here have called for—to read, in other words, for moments of rupture, contradiction, and deferral—is to privilege the marginalized voices of history, to recuperate the “residue” whose stories continue to haunt the archive.

Though this practice of reading for translation is, as I have argued, particularly resonant in the realm of fiction, its import to the realm of politics is not to be understated. In 2015, the Center for International Environmental Law (CIEL) published a report condemning the Transpacific Partnership (TPP)—a now-defunct free-trade agreement between 12 Pacific Rim countries—denounced the White House for its claims that “the TPP includes the strongest commitments on labor and the environment of any trade agreement in history, and those commitments are enforceable, unlike in past agreements.”<sup>313</sup> But this claim, CIEL argues, is misleading:

the environmental shortcomings of the TPP are reflected not only by what is not in the agreement, but also, by what is in the agreement—specifically, vague and unenforceable environmental commitments. For example, with respect to the conservation of wild flora and fauna and the illegal trade of protected species, Parties are only obliged to “combat,” not “prohibit,” “the illegal take of, and illegal trade in, wild flora and fauna.”<sup>314</sup>

Reading for translation in this context—both for what is explicitly left out of such agreements, as well as for language that serves a performative or obfuscatory function—enables lawyers and environmental activists to hold the government accountable for its promises by demanding verifiable processes and actionable change. And while the TPP no longer exists in this incarnation, the rapid development of other transpacific economic projects posing significant threats to environmental resources in a variety of linguistic

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<sup>313</sup> Center for International Environmental Law, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Environment: An Assessment of Commitments and Trade Agreement Enforcement, (November 2015), 1. [https://www.ciel.org/reports/tpp\\_enforcement\\_nov2015/](https://www.ciel.org/reports/tpp_enforcement_nov2015/)

<sup>314</sup> Center for International Environmental Law, “The Trans-Pacific Partnership,” 2.

and national contexts—chief among them China’s Belt and Road Initiative—require that we attend to the entwined processes of environmental slow violence and translational politics with renewed seriousness.<sup>315</sup>

If, as Yamashita ultimately suggests, the contemporary end product of Melville’s narrative of transpacific discovery is a “plastic doll”—a kitten-faced figure whose “benign cute look” masks, among other things, hormone-disrupting chemicals and a resistance to decay—then the challenge for writers and critics in the twenty-first century will be to parse the implications of these new literary and cultural materials, reading for moments of translational rupture that reveal the environmentally inflected forms of violence that they subtly mask.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>315</sup> See Wade Shepard, “Beijing to the World: Don’t Call it the Belt and Road Initiative OBOR,” *Forbes*, August 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/wadeshepard/2017/08/01/beijing-to-the-world-please-stop-saying-obor/#186c73f217d4>.

<sup>316</sup> Karen Tei Yamashita, “Kiss of Kitty.” *The Spectacle* Issue 2, 2016. <http://thespectacle.wustl.edu/?p=256>

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