

The Return of the Real in South Korean Fiction

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This article takes so-called migrant labor fiction in South Korea as an opportunity to think about the long-standing question of the politics of representation. Looking at recent fiction from Kim Insuk, Kim Chaeyŏng, and Kang Yŏngsuk, Hanscom argues that whatever its avowed politics, a text presenting the experience of the migrant laborer must claim a certain veracity or proximity to the real to achieve its effects. That the crossing of geopolitical borders is figured in these examples through the fantastic representation of speech outside of linguistic difference does not diminish the need to think through such representations in terms of the problem of realism, for which fiction is comprehended and valued to the extent that it expresses the actuality of the subject. In these stories, this actuality comes to the reader in two linked forms: the mundanity of the everyday, particularly the trope of urban poverty and the figure of the common people; and the imagined divorce of speech from ethnic-national or cultural context. What the essay finds is that rather than presenting a transcultural ideal of post-national community, representations of speech in these stories instead retain a culturalist impulse for which the “tie of language” remains linked to the “tie of blood.” Beyond the interpretation of an empathetic surface politics that aims to persuade the reader of the humanity

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of the laborer, culture remains linked to an economy of human types signaled by linguistic belonging.

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Kim Insuk's (2002) prize-winning "Pada wa nabi" (Sea and butterfly) tells the story of a mother taking her daughter abroad from Korea to China so that she might obtain an "international education"—the key, she tells us, to becoming a global citizen.¹ While her daughter is expected to attain this ideal, which is at base a linguistic achievement, the narrator is completely unable to make herself understood in the Chinese language and relies on the services of Chaegŭm, an ethnically Korean young Chinese woman who plays a triple role (or bears a triple burden) in the story: a "native" guide for the narrator in China; the daughter of an undocumented migrant who works at the narrator's mother's restaurant in South Korea; and a "foreign bride," headed to Korea to marry an aging bachelor whom she has never met. Having assumed a common ethnic bond and a concomitant fluidity of affect and language with Chaegŭm, the narrator finds herself unexpectedly alienated by a sense of strangeness, an incommensurability figured in the story through Chaegŭm's struggles with Korean as she "stammers" and gropes for the right words in an "unfamiliar" language (Kim 2002, 260).

In the penultimate scene of the story, the problem of language arrives at a strange resolution. The narrator has been drawn into a tattoo parlor. "I had only been in the country for ten days," she tells us, and "couldn't buy a bag of salt...by myself, let alone navigate a tattoo parlor, but my feet led me through the door" (Kim 2002, 178; Kim Insuk 2008, 286). At the same time that the proprietor addresses her in speech that she cannot comprehend, she sees a butterfly tattoo on the wall behind him. As she moves toward it, the old man rises from his chair, "first muttering something unintelligible, then shouting." Curiously, the narrator suddenly gains the ability to understand the man's subsequent extended discourse on the dangers of butterfly tattoos, particularly for (Korean) migrants. What is important here is not the content of the speech, but the fact of its comprehensibility. "Somehow," she tells us, "I'd managed to catch every word" (Kim 2002, 179; Kim Insuk 2008, 287). This is presented as an empathetic communication, one that appears to transcend linguistic difference.

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, fiction written in South Korea dealt increasingly with transnational migration: migrant marriages, transnational labor and migrant workers (*ijumin nodongja*), the multiculturalization of the cities and the countryside in Korea, cross-border movement from North to South, and the return of out-migrated ethnic Korean populations, including the so-called "Chosŏnjok" from Northeast China or Central Asia. This fiction considers the place of such outsiders in the context of a systematic enforcement

¹ Winner of the Yi Sang Literary Prize in 2003, "Sea and Butterfly" was originally published as "Pada wa nabi" in *Silkh'on munhak* (Winter 2002): 257–290. The story has also been published in English translation (Kim Insuk 2008).

of mobility and immobility, and explores ideas of community made intelligible within a globalized present still governed by or distributed across boundaries of nation, ethnos, and class.² As we will see below in an analysis of two oft-examined examples of “migrant labor fiction,” Kim Chaeyöng’s “K’okkiri” (Elephant) and Kang Yöngsuk’s “Kalsaek nunmul pang’ul” (Brown tears),” this intelligibility arrives through the fantasy of linguistic sameness, a transcultural communication that figures the crossing of geopolitical borders through speech that functions outside of linguistic difference.

Such efforts have frequently been received positively as a sign of multi-culturalization and the weakening of a vigorous ethnic-nationalism which posits linguistic and racial homogeneity as the basis of national belonging. The argument below holds that the politics of representation in migrant labor fiction is less transparent than this reading suggests. The fantasy of fluency that appears to enable understanding both conceals and reinforces a more primary fantasy, namely, the fantasy of the “mother tongue.” Rather than adopting the surface message of these works as a sufficient politics, I follow critic Kang Chin’gu in considering the racialized image of the migrant as distinct from this fantastical communion, an image intelligible through its silence or its unintelligibility. While the fantasy of translanguingual communication in unknown languages seems to remove language from the pseudo-biological status of the ethnic-national mother tongue, the presentation of such images underwrites the homolingual address that “assumes the normalcy of reciprocal and transparent communication in a homogeneous medium” (Sakai 1997, 8) and the silence or unintelligibility that is assumed to lie without.

The Limits of Transnational Migrant Labor Fiction in South Korea

Critics have been wary of the representational schemas by which figures such as migrant laborers, marriage migrants, or political refugees appear in fiction. As Kang Chin’gu (2009) points out, there are a diversity of approaches to such representation: from fiction that actively reproduces difference (of the foreign other) to that which criticizes racist or class-based forms of discrimination and exclusion and imagines a future solidarity across cultural difference. Regardless of the particular politics of the text, Kang argues that authors have tended to represent the migrant subject in three primary ways: as the perpetual other; as infantilized and in need of protection; and less frequently, as a threat to society, and in particular to a monolithic state ideology and the myths that support it. Each representative mode, he argues—no matter how critical it seems of the systematic exclusion of migrants—cannot but reproduce the self/other dichotomy in that the *image* of the migrant laborer functions independently of the critical message of the fiction in question (Kang Chin’gu 2009, 262–263).³

² On the idea of a system of immobility/mobility, see for instance “migrant containment” in Choo (2016).

³ On the exclusion of the “outside” as a condition of the imagination of the ethnic-nation in migrant labor fiction, see Yönn Namgyöng (2013b, 63–85).

Yön Namgyöng (2013b) refers to this zone of gradated representation in terms of what she calls a “borderland” (*chöpgyöng chidae*) of racialized cultural difference where self and other, citizens and migrants, come into contact and conflict. Focusing partly on the links between fictional settings and concrete sites (the industrial neighborhoods, the military camptown)—spaces marginal to both the city and to perceived Korean identity—Yön points to a contradiction between a discourse of inclusive multiculturalism and South Korea’s status as a sub-empire. This status compels a nationalist rhetoric against its own peripheral status to U.S. empire even as it depends on the periphery for its labor force. It is a colonial mode that leverages the threat of external domination to enforce an internal economy of inclusion and exclusion, a schema that establishes identity based in ethnic-national belonging against the constructed difference of other groups. As Hwang Hodök (2006) writes, “between the compulsion of capital without borders and the compulsion of the state to register [to identify, document, record], something is born—and that something is the colonial” (426).⁴ Thus in “multicultural” fiction we can observe what Yön calls an internal colonization, a racialized difference operating within state borders that is nonetheless consistent with the boundless reach of transnational capital. Difficulties in representing the situation of migrant labor in Korea emerge and play out across these marginal spaces in recent fiction, where the very extension of sympathy to the migrant laborer takes part in a strategy that creates and maintains the racial hierarchy of the internal colony (Yön 2013a, 276–277; Yön 2017).

While Kang focuses on the independence of the image of the migrant from the politics of the text—a way of privileging formal and affective effects over discourse—Yön subordinates the overt politics of the text to its overall position in a hierarchy of racialized imperial relations. Continuing this line of critique, which resists the surface politics of “multicultural” fiction and its (overt or implicit) claim of post-nationality, Yi Kyöngjae (2013) reviews four ways in which migrants have typically been treated in recent works. First, he writes, there are works of fiction that portray immigrants as “pölgö pösün cha”—subjects “stripped naked”—representing the reality (*hyönsil*) of absolute exclusion from society. Short fiction such as Kim Chaeyöng’s “K’okkiri” (Elephant), Yi Sibaek’s “Kae kap” (Dirty cheap), Sö Söngnan’s “P’ap’ürik’a” (Paprika), or Kang Hüjün’s “Yuryöng” (Ghost) fall into this category, dealing with migrant laborers, marriage migrants, and North Korean refugees, representing the suffering of those without recourse to law or empathy in the South Korean context. The risk that such fiction runs, writes Yi, is that in representing an insurmountable barrier between (national) self and (migrant) other, such fiction may reinforce the total alienation of migrants from Korean society.

Second, there are works of fiction that attempt to traverse or overcome the very otherness of the migrant by assimilating them as Koreans, such as Kim Ryöryöng’s “Wandüki,” Pak Pömsin’s “Namasü’e” (Namaste), or Pak Ch’ansun’s “Karibong yangggoch’i” (Karibong mutton kebobs). Here the pendulum, Yi writes, tends to swing in the opposite direction, ignoring difference and cultural specificity (*kyöyusöng*) in its capacity to imagine the migrant laborer without his or her otherness (Yi 2013, 249–250).

⁴ Cited in Yön Namgyöng (2013a, 264).

A third type points to fiction that presents the universal humanity of the migrant laborer and the Korean subject. Works such as Kim Yönsu's "Modu ege poktoen saehae" (New year's blessings for all) or Han Chasu's "Yöлтаeya esö on mujigae" (A rainbow on a tropical night) treat laborers as humans "without the need for a modifier" (*susigö*), while work by Son Honggyu or Kong Sönok aim to find the potential for solidarity between immigrants and Koreans on the basis of a socio-economic communality. Here, as an "unmodified" humanity conceals the socio-economic reality of migrants, Yi sees a failure to take particularity into account in the attempt to find a universal basis for community.

Yi (2013) advocates instead for an ethical stance that recognizes difference while imagining universality, an approach that takes into account a common "human dignity" while also remaining attentive to particularity (251). His position echoes a common sense that extends across the work of the three critics here briefly reviewed: that the subject/object split is basic to any definition of migrant labor fiction; that the same split is closely tied to the political ideology of the ethnic-nation within the larger context of global capital, and can be negotiated depending on the relationship between the local and the global in a given situation; that literary form can produce effects independently of the politics of a given text; and that a logic of verisimilitude determines both the fitness of texts for analysis and their status in a hierarchy of literary value.

The politics of the literary text is assumed to arrive in its message, in the presentation of what Hayden White (1976) calls a "verbal image of 'reality'" that is achieved "by registering a series of propositions which are supposed to correspond points by point to some extra-textual domain of occurrence or happening," a "real" domain of human experience (22). In terms of both form and content, "migrant labor fiction" depends on such a presupposition of representational veracity. Yet while a work may attempt to represent most fully the suffering of the disposable migrant subject for the reader, drawing the alien into empathetic understanding, it may just as easily and at the same time represent that subject in a way that reinforces stereotypes of the foreigner, constructing difference by reifying the racialized other. Both rely on proximity to the real, whether for critical effect or for analytical purchase.

The politics of the text does not reside precisely in its verisimilitude, then, but rather in the assumption of the possibility of that verisimilitude, here in the image of the migrant laborer—the assumption that makes proximity to the real appear attainable in the first place. In his analysis of the transition from representational to aesthetic regimes, Jacques Rancière (2007) points to a shift in sensibility wherein the image is no longer a "codified expression of a thought or a feeling" but is rather "a way in which things themselves speak and are silent," bearer of a "silent speech" (13). Such images are silent, for Rancière, in two ways. First there are "the meaning of things inscribed directly on their bodies, their visible language to be decoded...the capacity to exhibit signs written on a body, the marks directly imprinted by its history, which are more truthful than any discourse proffered by a mouth." These are "silent witnesses of a condition inscribed directly on their features, their clothes, their life setting." Second is an "obstinate silence," the appearance of a "naked, non-signifying presence" in possession of a "secret we shall never know," a secret "veiled by the very image that delivers

them to us” (13-15).

In the stories below, reality comes to the reader in two linked forms: in the mundanity of the everyday, via the inscription of foreignness and poverty on the bodies of the migrant laborers represented; and in the imagined divorce of speech from ethnic-national or cultural context. In the latter case we see the spontaneous ability to understand an unknown language, the uncanny fluency in the voice of the migrant laborer narrator, or as with the narrator of “Sea and Butterfly” the fantasy of communication outside of linguistic difference. The characters in each of these stories find themselves with the unexpected ability to make meaning in completely unknown languages, or with a fluency that throws into question the limitation of mother tongue to mono-ethnic national community. Communication is at once freed from the pseudo-biological status of the ethnic-national, “a political category that has been disguised as a biological one” (Weheliye 2014, 51), and reintroduced as a figure for transcultural community.

Yet this fantastical fluency or hyper-intelligibility constitutes the other side of the silent image, an image both inscribed as a “cipher of history” (Ranci re 2007, 25) and obstinately silent in its unknowability. This occurs partly because the concept of the mother tongue, in positing a transparent communication between members of the same ethnic-national community, establishes at the same time a surrounding unintelligibility or silence; and partly because such fluency—both the representation of fluency in the speech of the characters and in terms of the fluency of the narrative language (Korean) itself—masks a continued reliance on a mother tongue ideology necessary for the fiction to achieve its surface effects. Despite the appearance of transculturality and a focus on a shared horizon of experience, a culturalism—that “fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture” (Gilroy 1993, 2)—remains, for which group and culture overlap and where cultural difference occurs only between the interior and exterior of an ethnic-national community based in a mother tongue (Sakai 2005, 6).⁵

Behind the linguistic fluencies and cross-language communications made possible in these stories as the apparent basis for the construction of both understanding and community, there is another fantasy at work. This fantasy holds that borders are eliminated as they are crossed, and that language is consequently freed from its correspondence with an ethnic-national community, “the tie of language” no longer representing the “tie of blood” (Whitney 1867).⁶ Whether the fantasy is defending against an impermissible wish the fulfillment of which would violate social taboos or whether it is functioning in the narrative past tense as a sort of screen memory, disguising a conscious or unconscious mental content through the innocuous presentation of a past moment (Freud 1962, 301-322), it establishes a boundary that crops up precisely at the moment when another boundary’s elimination or transgression is imagined or represented, emerging invisibly under the guise of a fantasy that expresses just the opposite—the elimination of borders and boundaries.

⁵ See also Christopher Hutton (1999, 286).

⁶ Cited in Hutton (1999, 271).

Fantasies of Fluency: “Elephant” and “Brown Tears”

In Kim Chaeyŏng’s (2005) “Elephant,” language plays the role of a marker of difference but also as holding out the possibility of community.⁷ The protagonist, Akkas, is the twelve-year-old child of a Chinese Korean mother and a Nepalese father. “Of course, as an ethnic Korean from China she could get by anywhere in this country,” he tells us of his mother. “At least she’d have a quick comeback in Korean if anyone tried to shame or mistreat her” (Kim Chaeyŏng 2008, 184; Kim 2005, 11). His father, on the other hand, reminds him of a clown “when he speaks his garbled Korean... Everyone looks like an idiot when their words are unclear.” (Kim Chaeyŏng 2008, 186; Kim 2005, 14). Outside of a local convenience store, Akkas “can hear the racket” that the laborers make as they talk together. “They speak a mixture of Korean, Russian, English, even Nepalese, and I convert it all into Korean the instant their words reach my eardrums and slip inside my head” (Kim Chaeyŏng 2008, 196; Kim 2005, 25). Language is a barrier, but at the same time, holds out a certain hope for a common sense.

The common sense of migrant labor is figured in Kim’s story through the “timeless trope of urban poverty” (Park, Lee, and Wagner 2017, 362). The category of the poor is represented as community-oriented, embodying an ethos of mutual suffering. At the same time, this shared experience or ethics of the community of the poor is broken when poverty is represented as the experience of the marginalized individual (372). Leaving aside the question of whether or not this itself undermines incorporation of migrant laborers into the political category of the *minjung* (common people) and the imagination of new forms of community, this entire dynamic is masked by the uncanny fluency of the narrator, the fantasy of seamless communication across ethnic-national and class boundaries. While the *minjung* is strategically claimed in public discourse by migrant laborers as a political identity,⁸ how does cultural representation of *ijumin nodongja* forego the politics of the *minjung* in representing such laborers as both atomized individuals and as unproblematically fluent “native speakers”?

Naoki Sakai (2010) defines the native speaker as “one who bears the mother tongue or national mother tongue as the ground of personal authenticity”(24).⁹ In this sense, the narrator’s discourse reinforces both the individuation of the laborers (he is the universality to their linguistic particularity) and the qualifying relationship between language figured as ethnic-national and the capacity to narrate the real. Language is racialized, giving us a perspective on the “enormous gap between classism of the preceding mono-ethnic context and the racialized class system in the fast-multiracializing context of contemporary South Korea.” While the migrant laborers have in a sense become or joined the “*minjung*” of the present, the status of “laborer” has not been conferred upon migrant workers by the racially

⁷ The story has also been published in English translation as “Elephant” in *New Writing from Korea* 1 (Kim Chaeyŏng 2008, 182-208).

⁸ See Timothy Lim, “Rethinking Belongingness in Korea: Transnational Migration, ‘Migrant Marriages’ and the Politics of Multiculturalism,” *Pacific Affairs* 83, no. 1 (March 2010): 51–71.

⁹ Or as Hutton (1999) puts it, “The logic of the mother-tongue idea is that a particular individual should be the speaker of a particular language” (286).

discriminatory state (Lee 2017, 152). Racial identification is further reinforced through attention to language, where it is the “(foreign) accent” that both marks one as a non-native speaker and defines, in its failure, the “uncorrupted origination point” of a pure language embodied by the native speaker (Chow 2014, 57). The fantasy of fluency here hides but reinforces the primary fantasy that there is a pure language in the first place.

For Kang Chin’gu (2009), beneath the surface of this narrative voice—that of the mixed-race Akkas, who exists on the border of “them” and “us”—what we ultimately see are resolutely stereotypical images of migrant laborers living in squalid conditions, dreaming of their hometowns in foreign countries, stealing from “us” and from one another in the extremities of their poverty (253). In Yön Namgyöng’s (2013a) analysis, this image at the same time displays conditions of internal colonization and racial hierarchy. The migrant laborers are completely marginalized, yet are at the same time subject to a social hierarchy based on the identity of race and class. The representation of a link between national belonging and race is made clear in the story as one of the characters, Koon, passes as white, or when Akkas attempts to bleach his skin.

As Yön (2013a) points out, the Korean character P’iryong’s diatribe outside the small store where the laborers congregate reveals the identification of migrant laborers in terms of both class and historical development. In response to the multi-lingual banter among the drinking laborers, he slurs:

Damn it, quit it with the jibber jabber. I’m starting to feel like I’m in some other country. Do you guys have any idea how this country got to be the way it is now? When I worked in a factory way back when, losing fingers was nothing. Whole forearms flew off and even necks got sliced.... You won’t catch any Koreans working in such places nowadays, though... to be blunt, it’s backbreaking work and they know it firsthand. That’s why they leave it to all of you—they didn’t bring you over here for a joy ride... They didn’t even [treat their own] nationals [as human beings]—what makes you think they’ll [treat you any differently]? (Kim 2008, 197; Kim 2005, 25–26).

The status of the suffering laborer, the proletariat, is here passed to the migrant worker, in the temporal shift from “way back when” to “nowadays.” Falling into Yi Kyöngjae’s (2013) third type, the picture of “unmodified” humanity bound through socioeconomic commonality, the workers here become the same, “treated no differently.” That is, though in terms of their social status or their ethnic identity they are marked as different, in terms of their labor and their value to the market, they are identical.

Akkas’ father is a key figure for this in the story. Trained in Nepal as an astronomer, he works making light bulbs at a factory in Seoul, moving from the celestial to the industrial, the cosmic to the man-made. Handling the hot glass every day has stripped his fingers of their skin, leaving him without fingerprints. Labor deprives him of the mark of his identity. Without a birth certificate his son Akkas, unknown to any state or nationality, inherits this

lack. This intergenerational sameness remains located within an exclusionary hierarchy figured in terms of morphological difference. Even as “socioeconomic commonality” is offered through the politicized category of the *minjung*, the “sameness” of labor is made different through the familiar colonial gesture of consigning the other to a past moment. Foreign labor here is relegated to the “imaginary waiting-room of history” (Chakrabarty 2000, 7) even as it joins the ranks of the common.

The anxiety of sameness/difference appears here as well in terms of language. Whereas in “Sea and Butterfly” the characters are removed from the ethnic-national context of Korea and Korean becomes a misleading sign of familiarity in a strange territory, in “Elephant” language appears to move across ethnic-national identities through the “mixing” (*twisökkim*) of language and through the “mixed race” character of Akkas. In both stories, language appears delinked from racial identity, yet both rely on a fantasy of fluency—of immediate and seamless communication—in order to establish an idea of community outside the ethno-nation. In this sense, in both stories a mystical communion across languages takes place, with the protagonists either suddenly comprehending a language completely unknown, or comprehending all spoken languages and translating them into the narrative language of the story.¹⁰

In “Brown Tears” too, questions of sameness and belonging appear through an anxiety regarding language. Written by Kang Yöngsuk and published in 2009, the story presents a young female narrator living in a dilapidated Pak Chönghüi-era apartment building “covered with moss and rust” and “looking like an abandoned temple,” managed by an elderly man and his wheelchair-bound wife and passed over by urban re-development (Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 191-215).¹¹ We learn that the narrator is somehow “lumped together” with the “losers who live in that villa” (Kang 2008, 139; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 202) on the second floor, which she shares with a trio of migrant laborers—a Sri Lankan woman, and two men—who live together in an apartment down the hall from the protagonist. The narrator is careful to point out, however, that there is no basis for this so-called “community”—though they live across the hallway from one another, “there hadn’t been the slightest hint of camaraderie based on our shared social status not to mention any actual communication between us” (Kang 2008, 132; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 194).

The narrator has suffered a heartbreak as the story opens, and after a failed suicide attempt somewhat whimsically decides that she needs a hobby and enrolls in an English language course. “It wouldn’t really have mattered if they were teaching the international language of Esperanto” the narrator tells us, “...or the revered but long forgotten language of a Chinese minority that had disappeared a thousand years ago, or even sign language” (Kang 2008, 136-137; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 199). In the English class, however, she is unable to speak: “Out of the blue, I’d developed a severe stutter, and it quickly devolved into a

¹⁰ The falseness of this delinking is represented in Akkas’s painful attempts to bleach his skin white, an act that adheres to a gruesome logic in a situation where “language possession is translated into and receives its value as skin color” (Chow 2014, 3).

¹¹ The story has also been published in English translation as “Brown Tears” in *New Writing from Korea* 1, 132–151.

kind of aphasia.... The moment my name was called, my whole body stiffened... I began to stutter, it was so bad that I couldn't breathe" (Kang 2008, 137-138; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 199-200).

The anxiety about language here is not simply due to the narrator's unfamiliarity with English. "Forget English," she tells us. "The words that I already knew in my mother tongue [*maüm sok e itinün mal*] would barely leave my mouth" (Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 202). The narrator longs to speak again but cannot. Further, her neighbors do not speak Korean. When they walk in the yard together, they mumble in their mutually unintelligible languages (Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 205); she cannot understand the "mother tongue" (*mogugö*) of the Sri Lankan woman (213); and the narrator is also gradually estranged from her English classmates, who ask her why she insists on making an outcast of herself in her apparent refusal to speak (210).

The narrator is thus in a relation of incommensurability with both those inside and outside of her sphere of "natural" or "primary" language. Having lost the power of speech, she is considered "one of the losers who live on the second floor" by the building manager or as an "outcast" by her classmates; on the other hand, not knowing their language, she has no way of communicating with her neighbors.

It is only when the narrator aids the Sri Lankan woman through a health crisis (she comes across her neighbor half dead in her apartment from an acute case of hemorrhoids) that she finds herself in the company of the migrant laborers, "chatting together in languages that the other couldn't possibly understand" (213). Here, Kang Chin'gu (2009) notes, the story shows a relation of compassion or sympathy between "us" and "them," aiming at a kind of patronizing solidarity, while at the same time putting forward an image of the foreigner as distinct from this fantastical communion, an image embodying the poverty, criminality, and filth of the migrant, her "unintelligible sounds" and her smell marking her as irretrievably and silently other (261).

The story closes with a fantasy of renewed community when the narrator opens her mouth and begins to speak in her English class. She reports to them, in English, what her neighbor has told her prior to her departure for Sri Lanka: about her home in Sri Lanka, about growing up with her little sister, and about how she was brought to Korea. That is, the narrator reports the speech of the Sri Lankan migrant, spoken to her in a language that the narrator doesn't understand (presumably Sinhalese or Tamil), to her Korean classmates, in a language that she doesn't know (English). "My friend lives in Sri Lanka," she tells them. "Sri Lanka is a beautiful place, my friend told me that night" (Kang 2008, 150; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 214).

The narrator then shifts into the first person, voicing the Sri Lanka woman's enunciative position in their previous conversation: "I don't know how I got here. I fell asleep after I'd eaten candy that a stranger gave me, and when I woke up, I was in a strange place. Every night I dreamed a dream that I was looking back" (Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 214). Her breakthrough in the English class is followed by another at the apartment building when the manager's wife unexpectedly rises from her wheelchair and begins to walk again. "Apparently," the story closes, "a miracle was upon us" (Kang 2008, 151; Kang Yöngsuk 2009, 216).

For Yi Kyŏngjae (2013), “Brown Tears” is an example of fiction that moves beyond either a focus on the otherness of the migrant or an unproblematic assimilation of the other into Korean identity. The story does this by representing a communal bond between the Korean narrator and the Southeast Asian woman, a shared feeling (*kyogam*) that emerges not through a common language but through a common understanding of suffering. It is at this moment, when the narrator can relate to the suffering of a “disposable human,” that she sheds her aphasia and “confesses what the Southeast Asian woman has been through.” “What is more important than the content of the speech,” Yi writes, “is the form of the speech itself, in that it demonstrates the need to communicate, in whatever way possible” (278). The narrator becomes, for a moment, the Southeast Asian woman, communicating in English, and it is here, Yi holds, that a true, ethical communication may emerge, at the point where it is no longer possible to distinguish who is the same and who is other, which is self (*tongilcha*) and which is other (*t’aja*).

Yet here too the recovery of speech in the shift from aphasia to fluency both within and across ethnic-national lines—the apparent erasure of boundaries of inclusion and exclusion marked out by language communities—again masks the relationship between discourse and image. Speech remains the fundamental criterion of belonging. It is through the recovery of speech that the narrator also recovers her sense of belonging. As well, the speech that returns is figuratively or (so to speak) diegetically a foreign language but is rendered in Korean. The author can hardly be faulted for writing in Korean for a Korean-speaking audience, but at the same time, this too signals a fundamental limit to the fantasy scene with which the story ends. All language comes to us as Korean. Finally, the miraculous shift from aphasia to fluency occurs too late—the immigrant has been returned to her country, and only her story remains to be told to and understood by a community of Korean listeners.

Su Kyŏng (2017) has pointed out that there are two dynamics to the closing scenes: *the thing that was missing returns*, and *the thing that was present disappears*. In the first case, we have both the return of speech, and also the miraculous return of mobility to the elderly woman living on the first floor of the narrator’s apartment building, who stands up from her wheelchair in the final moments of the story. In the second case, we have the removal of the hemorrhoids by a leading South Korean proctologist, and also the disappearance of the woman and the two men who had lived with her at the end of the story, as they have (been) returned to their home countries. Behind the dramatic and parallel physical returns (of mobility, of speech) and in the return to health marked by disappearance or removal, we find screened a secret wish: that the thing that was here return to where it had come from. Only then will the return to fluency and belonging be possible.

The silence of the Sri Lankan woman, broken only by unintelligible noise, goes hand in hand with the unexpected translingual fluency of the narrator, who like Akkas and the narrator of “Sea and Butterfly” achieves a perfect transparency of communication across languages. This fluency appears to exceed the failures of language that mark a speaker as foreign. Yet as I have argued this transparency masks both the primary fantasy of the mother tongue as the basis of community and the opacity of the unnamed woman, the “reality” of

migrancy inscribed on her mute body. This image is not permitted to interrupt the narrative with its sheer material presence—even as the fact (*facere*) of the woman is obscured behind the flood of speech, the “naked, non-signifying presence” (Rancière 2007, 14–15) is compelled signify, the secret of a real made known to us in the unlikely and fantastic presentation of the narrator.

Conclusion

Wherever intelligibility is posited, assumed, or demanded, there is something relegated to unintelligibility. Where a particular discourse is put forward as having maximum or universal intelligibility, something is relegated to non-speech, to invisibility, to the unsayable or unrepresentable. In this sense, politics is not the exercise of or struggle for power, but—as Rancière (2009) holds—“the configuration of a specific space, the framing of a particular sphere of experience, of objects posited as common..., of subjects recognized as capable of designating those objects and putting forward arguments about them” (24). This is a conflict over what he calls the “distribution of the sensible”—that which allows something to appear sensible or reasonable, and prohibits something else from appearing as such. This sensibility is the definition of the limits of a community consisting of political subjects, an index of belonging, of the limits of intelligibility, where intelligibility is understood not as something *given to*, but as something *given in*: the capacity to be understood, a competency given in an object, person, or statement, prior to, or simultaneous with, the appearance of understanding. “For all time,” Rancière (2009) writes, “the refusal to consider certain categories of people as political beings has proceeded by means of a refusal to hear the words exiting their mouths as discourse” (24). The political act, in this sense, would consist in “reconfiguring the distribution of the sensible which defines the common of a community, to introduce into it new subjects and objects, to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals” (25).

If politics is the delineation of the field of speech itself, what can be said and argued and the determination of those who may make those arguments, then it would seem possible to read these stories as political precisely in their representation of the strange expansion of linguistic intelligibility, the appearance of commensurability in the rendering of what had heretofore not been heard. Literature would take on the role of imagining forms of community that exceed the immobilities or forced mobilities that structure the idea and practice of the ethnic nation. If the 1990s and early 2000s were characterized by what critic Hwang Chongyŏn (2007) called a “postmodern turn,” marked by unreliable narrators who no longer speak for all Koreans, the supersession of a literature of political commitment by fiction focused on the minutiae of everyday life, and the disappearance of national culture into the uncertainty of individual identity (5–6), then we could say that a sense of the real had perhaps returned in migrant labor fiction. Literature would have regained its political commitment with the figure of the dispossessed laborer at its center, even if national culture

re-appears as a problem rather than a given, and though the narrator lacks the confident authority as a representative of that national culture. Language, on the surface of these stories, seems a plurality rather than the univocal enunciation of ethnic-national sameness.

Yet what we have found is that hidden behind the fantastic linguistic fluencies and cross-language communications seemingly made possible in these three stories is a return of the real in the form of a boundary or border that reestablishes itself at the very moment of its apparent dissolution. It is in the relationship between the voice of the narrator and the fiction's representation of national culture that we find the structuring principle of these stories: in "Elephant," the making-fluent of the voice of the child Akkas; in "Sea and Butterfly," national identities that continue to be established along linguistic lines and which can be overcome only in a moment of mystical experience; and in "Brown Tears," where speech remains the fundamental criterion of belonging in a story that represents multiple languages under the umbrella of a Korean tongue itself missing from the thematics of language presented to us in the narrative. These fantasies form a kind of screen memory that defends against the wish that "what was missing would return, and what was present would disappear," an object of desire that would violate the globalist multicultural discourse of the present era.

Where a new reality seems to appear before our eyes, a reality that would authorize new ways of thinking about community, we see a memory of the present that exposes more of a longing to return to pre-traumatic wholeness than a revolutionary attack on culturalism. At the moment when the ideology of the mother tongue seems to disappear, the identity of speech and (ethnic-national) community reasserts itself along newly formed lines of transcultural incommensurabilities that arise not at the level of content but at the level of form. The "real" of the stories appears not only in the representation of the reality and struggle of migrant labor and a changing socio-economic situation. The fantasy of communication across linguistic barriers emerges as much a sign of anxiety regarding language and community as of a utopian impulse toward seamless multicultural belonging. Behind the silent image of the migrant laborer and the fantastic disavowal of difference, race—the "tie of blood" signaled by the "tie of language"—continues to structure the social, providing avenues by which sameness and difference are imagined.

Rather than disturbing language at either the level of speech or the level of fictional representation, the fantastical situations put forward in the three stories briefly discussed above render incomprehension representable in a way that undermines the potential for fiction to serve as a site for challenging and rethinking the boundaries of sensibility—that is, the politics of the literary text. Fantasy instead works to hide the raced and classed hierarchies of human types, representing a particular way of seeing "in which the parties are presupposed as already given, their community established and the count of their speech identical to their linguistic performance" (Rancière 1999, 102).

The celebratory language of "border crossing" gives the sense that we have entered into a period in which national boundaries are being broken down and the naturalized links between language, culture, nationality, and ethnicity are being dismantled. As a consequence, a focus on works representing migration, cross-border labor, emigration and diaspora, and

subjects “stripped naked” are understood to have become topics with a particular political valence. Yet in the works of fiction most closely associated with this turn, the possible is not disturbed or interrupted and “native” speech remains the criterion of belonging. That the crossing of geopolitical borders is figured in the specific examples above through the fantastic representation of speech outside of linguistic difference does not diminish the need to think through such representations in terms of the problem of realism, for which fiction is comprehended and valued to the extent that it expresses the actuality of the subject. If the real returns in migrant labor fiction, it returns in a way that is normative, and leaves open the question of whether or not there is a literary language adequate to the experience of the unrepresentable.

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