

Words that Hurt

Yi Yangji's Yuhi and the Embodied Subject in Transit

Not long after the death of Kin Kakuei in 1985, literary critic Kuroko Kazuo offered a bleak assessment of the state of Zainichi literature as it transitioned from Kin and Kim Sökpöm's second-generation era to that of the third. These younger writers—whose chief representative in Kuroko's reckoning was Yi Yangji, the subject of this chapter—are conscious of themselves as “strangers” in a strange land (*ihōjin*), subject to discrimination in Japan, yet equally alienated from a Korea to which they cannot return. This sense of in-betweenness, of being violently removed from both Korea and Japan, is found in the work of first- and second-generation writers as well, Kuroko notes, as it is arguably the very meaning of being “Zainichi.” The problem, according to Kuroko, is that whereas previous generations responded to this issue with political engagement, either battling Japanese discrimination or fighting for reunification, these younger writers turn inward, more interested in the psychological than social aspects of their identities. His critique recalls those aimed at Kin Kakuei—that he subordinated the political to the personal.

Moreover, he echoes much broader contemporary criticism of Japanese literature as a whole, even making this comparison explicit:

It can be said that the tendencies shared by the third generation are utterly in accord with the younger generation of writers debuting in contemporary Japanese literature, such as Shimada Masahiko and Kobayashi Kyōji, or even going back to Murakami Haruki and the like, who are content to revel in their own inner emptiness, without turning their attention to the world, society, or revolution. In other words, at least for now younger Zainichi writers avoid falling into “literarism” by relying on the sense of being a “stranger” that defines their existence—or to put it another way, by centering the ethnonation [*minzoku*], which acts as a kind of *raison d'être* for Zainichi Korean

Literature. Still, they are in jeopardy of assimilating into the troubling mainstream of contemporary Japanese literature. In fact, Yi Yangji's [recent work] strengthens this trend toward existentialism, and there is not a trace of ethnic consciousness to be found.¹

Kuroko's worry here is not that Zainichi writers are abandoning the political in favor of the personal. His position is that unlike the Japanese authors he cites, Yi Yangji cannot simply detach from the political—her existence *as Zainichi* precludes such a move. This comes through especially in Kuroko's reading of the recently deceased Kin Kakuei in the same essay. Kin's tragic life story cannot be told without reference to the peninsular divisions fracturing Zainichi politics and alienating him from the community.² Rather, Kuroko's fear is that Zainichi Koreans might *become Japanese*, and via this assimilation also conform to the melancholy apolitical current of Japanese literature.³ What began with Kin Kakuei comes to a head with Yi Yangji: the rejection of Zainichi nationalism in favor of a personal (read intersectional) politics is dismissed as assimilation.

Notably, the politics of gender are elided here, similarly to the elision of disability politics in criticism of Kin Kakuei. In fact, serious considerations of gender have only belatedly arrived on the scene of Zainichi literary criticism.⁴ Rather, the difference between Kin and Yi for Kuroko and other critics sympathetic to Zainichi nationalism is really about their stances vis-à-vis Japan, or the prospects of being or becoming Japanese. Whereas Kin, despite his allegedly reactionary or solipsistic politics, narrates his own awakening to his Korean identity and thereafter remains tied to it, Yi's story is one of her failure to properly become Korean.

Yi grew up in a thoroughly assimilated home, her parents having naturalized (thereby conferring Japanese citizenship on her) when she was nine years old. She attended Japanese schools and went by the name Tanaka Yoshie. Her passing was so effective that she did not recall facing any discrimination as a child. However, as a young adult she became more involved in ethnic politics, and eventually traveled to Seoul to study Korean folk music and dance, in the hope of better understanding her ethnic heritage. By this point her parents had divorced, and while she was pursuing a degree in Korean literature at Seoul National University, both of her brothers died suddenly. Her life was touched repeatedly by tragedy, up to and including her untimely death in 1992. The fracturing or in-betweenness of her identity is one element of this tragic life story.

Ironically, as we can see from the description of third-generation writers as *ihōjin*, by the time Yi Yangji debuted, Zainichi identity had come to be defined by the very sense of "in-betweenness" that for writers like Kim Sōkpōm was destructive of Zainichi coherence. But in between what? As previously discussed, *zainichi* is a spatial descriptor, its literal meaning denoting nothing more than presence in Japan. Of course, as we have also seen, to be "in Japan" can connote much broader kinds of being than embodied presence—a being in the language, the history, the

post-imperial politics that go into making Japan as much as the boundaries of its archipelago. In the same way, to be “in between” Japan and Korea has little to do with the positioning of the physical body between the two landmasses corresponding to the Japanese and Korean nation states. This territorialized language is not dissimilar from narrative prosthesis, in that it relies on the body as metaphor but ignores its physical realities.

In this chapter, I unpack and interrogate configurations of speech, text, and body in Yi Yangji's *Yuhi* (1988) in order to arrive at a clearer picture of what exactly falls “between” what in notions of Zainichi identity. “In-betweenness,” like “transgression” and “hybridity,” can imply coherence in the two entities whose boundaries it ostensibly blurs. *Yuhi* belies the blithe assumption of the internal coherence of languages through the figure of the translator, and explodes the condition of possibility for empathy and mutual understanding itself through the figure of the never-quite-present body. Through these figures, Yi is able to explore the affective potential of non-meaning sound and meaningful silence, as well as the violence of legibility and speech.

THE TRANSLATOR-NARRATOR AS SUBJECT IN TRANSIT

Among the most intriguing aspects of *Yuhi* is the gap it creates between the Japanese text and the voice of the narrating character, who has no knowledge of Japanese. The novella tells the story of Yuhi,⁵ a Zainichi woman who comes to Korea seeking to reconnect with an ethnic homeland from which she feels alienated. The narrative begins at the moment of this mission's failure, with Yuhi abruptly returning to Japan. Her time in Korea is related in flashback, as her elderly landlady (referred to as “Oba” [Aunt]) and the narrator, “Onni”⁶ (Oba's live-in niece), recall the time they spent with Yuhi while she lived in their home for the final six months of her sojourn. Thus, the narrative present of the story is set entirely in Korea, from which Yuhi (the only Japanese-speaking character) is already absent. Yet, it is rendered in Japanese, a language that is foreign to both the narrating character and the geographical space she occupies throughout. This leads to moments of uncan-niness, as when the narrator states (in Japanese), “I couldn't read Japanese at all.”⁷

In fact, this choice of narrator has caught the attention of critics and readers of the work since its publication. The standard interpretation of the narrative gap tends to conclude that the choice of the nameless Korean “Onni” as narrator allows for a more “objective” look at Yuhi that could not be achieved without some distance from the character.⁸ Indeed, the author herself endorsed this view in the afterword to the Korean translation of *Yuhi*, stating that “the original motivation for my attempt to portray the figure of a Zainichi Korean through the eyes of a Korean living in Korea was the need to understand myself more objectively, more thoroughly.”⁹ Yi's stated intentions notwithstanding, the consequences of her

choice lead to a narrative that is much more suggestive than a mere examination of the self from an “outside” or “objective” perspective—a project whose possibility is dubious in the first place. Instead, because the narrating perspective lies outside the narrative language of the text, to read *Yuhi* is to experience a text always already in translation.¹⁰

What I want to propose at the outset of my reading of *Yuhi* is that the novel’s narrative voice—not “Onni” per se but rather the translating presence rendering the text in Japanese—constitutes what Naoki Sakai calls a “subject in transit.” In other words, this narrator, as translator, “must be internally split and multiple, and devoid of a stable positionality.”¹¹ If, in the narrative present, Onni is positioned stably within Korea and Yuhi is positioned stably outside it, then the narrator-translator exists not in the gap between, but rather in a plane where such a gap (whether between languages or geopolitical spaces) is unrepresentable. This allows the text to expose the limitations of spatial metaphors for language, subjectivity, and sociality, just as *Kogoru kuchi* dismantles standard bodily metaphors of isolation and oppression.

Whereas translation is typically understood as an act of transmission between two bounded entities (such as Korean and Japanese) that are external to each other, as Sakai points out, it is the act of translation itself that “borders” languages in the first place. Translation is a practice of rendering radically incommensurable nonsense into sense, such that the difference of that nonsense can be represented as *distance*. In Sakai’s words:

Translation pertains to two dimensions of difference that must not be confused: radical difference of discontinuity that does not render itself to spatialized representation, and measured difference in continuity that is imagined in terms of a border, gap or crevice between two spatially enclosed territories or entities, figuratively projected as a distance between two figures accompanying one another. And the transition from the first to the second we often call ‘translation.’¹²

With the thoroughly territorialized (or bordered) entities of Japan and Korea looming large in *Yuhi*, the deterritorialized figure of the translator-narrator becomes a discomfiting presence, betraying the spatial logic of Korean difference from Japan.

This uncanny narration provides the backdrop for a novel more generally concerned with displacement in time as well as space. Because the majority of the plot is related through Onni’s flashbacks, the narrative is constantly shifting between the present time—the day that Yuhi has departed for Japan—and the past, when Yuhi is still in Korea. At times, this broken narrative can leave the reader confused about what is happening when and where. Early in the novel, Onni is on her way home from work the day of Yuhi’s departure. The narrator tells of her hurried trip home, and of the deserted, empty feeling of the neighborhood when she finally reaches her street:

The memory of Yuhi's voice prodded me in the back. I could sense her shifting gaze, seeping as it had into the sound of that voice. Beckoned by that voice, by that gaze, I turned around. Yuhi was standing beside me. I could clearly remember her face in profile looking up toward the top of the hill. Just like that day six months ago, I stood next to Yuhi, looking up at the bare rocks on the peaks that stretched back in the distance (276).

Here, the narrative suddenly and seamlessly shifts to the past, and it is unclear for just a moment whether Yuhi is actually there or Onni is merely envisioning her there. It is not until later, when we are told that Yuhi has left the country, that it becomes clear that this is Onni's memory. For the time being, the line between past and present is blurred, and it is possible that Yuhi is, in fact, presently standing beside Onni, looking up at the mountain, just as she had in the past.

Even later in the novel, when it has been established that Yuhi has left the country and is no longer present, traces of her remain—in Onni's memory, as well as in the flow of the novel. Yuhi's character is a constant presence in the narrative, despite being completely absent from its present time. For example, once inside the house, after being scolded by her aunt for failing to properly say goodbye to Yuhi, Onni goes up to Yuhi's now vacated room, where she continues to feel her presence:

Somehow the empty room felt smaller than it had when it was full of her things.

Yuhi was still in this room.

I was arrested by the traces of her that remained. They drew me back whenever I thought about getting up to leave, and kept me grounded to that spot (284).

Here, despite the fact that the reader knows that Yuhi is not actually in the room, the narrator continues to relate her nagging sense that Yuhi is still in the house, making her presence felt. Though this passage lacks the ambiguity of the one above, it is no less effective at trapping the reader between times through the narrator's own ambiguous temporal location. Even as Onni remembers Yuhi from months ago, she cannot physically conjure Yuhi's presence in the room. It is only the floating presence of the narrator, the disembodied translator, who can occupy these two positions simultaneously. Moreover, though it is clear that the character of Onni is placed firmly in Korea throughout the novel (in both its past and present), the location of the narrator is undetermined both spatially and temporally. The moment of narration is necessarily later than the moment the story takes place, opening up the possibility of its narration from a space outside Korea, outside Japan, or even from an imaginary space open to ambiguity or contradiction.

Atsuko Ueda takes up this issue in her incisive reading of the novel, wherein she demonstrates how the ironic linguistic construction of the narrative lends ambiguity to the novel's sense of place. In the course of her analysis, Ueda notes that the text rarely refers explicitly to "Japan" or "Korea," but more often uses terms like *uri nara* (our country) or *i nara* (this country). Moreover, these Korean terms usually appear with their Japanese equivalents or "translations" (*bokoku* [motherland] for

uri nara, and *kono kuni* [this country] for *i nara*). These glosses are meant perhaps as a convenience for Japanese readers, but Ueda sees a more complicated picture. In nearly all instances of the appearance of these terms in the novel, the most obvious reading would assume that they refer to Korea rather than Japan, but Ueda argues that the presence of these “translations” introduces doubt. She writes, “The juxtaposition of the *hangŭl* with its translation (in Japanese characters) renders the antecedent ambiguous. Does *uri nara* (*bokoku*) refer to Korea, or to Japan? Do *uri nara* and *bokoku* even have the same antecedent? Because of the ambiguous relationship between these symbols and their referents, it is impossible to decide with any certainty.”¹³

Though Ueda’s focus here is on ambiguity in language, I would argue that these uncertain referents also serve to muddle the reader’s sense of the spatial location of the narrator. After all, if it is possible that *uri nara*, or especially *bokoku*, refers to Japan, then the possibility exists that the narrator is located in Japan. The narrator is not only translator, but in transit. In another passage earlier in the novel, the Korean words “*i nara*” (this country) appear juxtaposed with the Japanese “*kono kuni*” more or less without context, allowing for perhaps greater referential ambiguity than even *uri nara* and *bokoku*:

Why had she left? Why couldn’t Yuhi have stayed in this country [*kono kuni*]? These questions were pointless now, but still I felt flushed with anger as they came to mind.

‘*I nara* (*Kono kuni*).’

As I stood there, Yuhi’s voice flitted through my mind. I thought back on all the times Yuhi had spoken these words, all the different looks on her face, all the different ways the words sounded coming out of her mouth. There was the day she muttered them under her breath, seemingly out of contempt for herself. The day she spat them out carelessly mid-sentence, sarcastically, scornfully. The day she mumbled them tentatively, as if struggling to find some other words to use and coming up empty. The day she uttered them as a desperate plea (282).

Here, it is not quite clear who is uttering this “*i nara*” or “*kono kuni*,” or even perhaps which of the two is being spoken. It could just be a reference to a time when Yuhi spoke these words, since it is apparent from the paragraph that follows that she did in fact utter them on a number of occasions. It is also possible that Onni herself is speaking them as she recalls these instances of Yuhi’s use of the words, “*i nara*.”

However, what seems to prompt the narrator to recall these words is her own use of the Japanese equivalent, “*kono kuni*,” in the preceding sentence. This raises the question of what is being quoted here. Is it the narrator’s own use of “*kono kuni*” beforehand? Or is it perhaps the use of “*i nara*,” prior to hypothetical translation? Or does it refer to her memories of Yuhi’s use of “*i nara*,” albeit prior to their representation in text? Is it possible that this might even refer to memories of Yuhi uttering the Japanese words “*kono kuni*”? None of these questions have clear answers, and without knowing exactly what is being spoken and by whom,

it is impossible to be certain whether this “i nara” or “kono kuni” refers to Korea or Japan. Though in the reality of the story, the narrator’s first question—“why couldn’t Yuhi have stayed in this country?”—seems to ask why she was unable to remain in Korea, there may be some room to interpret this question (especially since it appears in Japanese, using the Japanese phrase “kono kuni” rather than the Korean “i nara”) as a question of why Yuhi was unable to remain in Japan, or why she felt the need to search for herself in Korea.

In any case, this moment of heightened confusion of spaces and languages allows the disembodied translator-narrator to come to the fore. Without a subject transversing the spaces and translating the words of “kono kuni” and “i nara,” the two are unable to come into contact, creating the uncanny sensibility present in this and other passages of the novel. The translating narrator enjoys greater freedom not only to float through and across these colliding spaces, but also to call into question their very distinction. Due to the narrator’s ability to seamlessly traverse the two, “i nara” and “kono kuni” collapse into one and the same entity, offering a moment’s respite from the conflict between politically bounded Korea and Japan that drives Yuhi’s (or Yi Yangji’s) entire struggle. By positing an extraspatial, extralinguistic narrating voice, Yi is able to effect a fleeting escape from the impasse in which she is embedded, by imagining a realm in which the impasse is null and void.

ABSENCE AND THE AFFECT OF ILLEGIBILITY

If the narrator of *Yuhi* is unlocatable due to her being in transit, then the title character is similarly unlocatable, but due to absence. Although Yuhi too is technically in transit, en route to Japan, this is less important to the story than the fact of her being missing from it. The narrative repeats the refrain that Yuhi is not there: not in the country, not in the house, not in her room, and in multiple instances, “not anywhere” (*doko ni mo inai*) (326, 335). For Onni, this is a bitter reality, each successive realization of which shocks her anew. This shock is often described as physically impacting her body, perceived as a wriggling lump inside her, or as a piercing or percussive sensation. Yuhi’s lack of corporeal presence does little to limit her corporeal effects on Onni.

In fact, the novel is structured as a series of scenes in which Onni visits sites where Yuhi’s absence is palpable and narrates the memories triggered by physical presence in these spaces. Unsure how to cope with the loss of Yuhi, Onni moves vicariously through the spaces she occupied in an attempt to bring her back, even if only in spirit. As mentioned above, when Onni first returns from work at the beginning of the story, she stands outside the house looking up at the rocks on the mountainside, with Yuhi “standing beside [her]” (276). This turns out to be a reenactment of a moment when Yuhi gazed up at the same rocks before she left. As Onni moves into the house, she pauses in the entryway to recall a moment Yuhi

did the same. After entering the house, she stands behind the living room sofa, recalling that this is where Yuhi sat the day she first came to their house. Then she is arrested by the illusion that Yuhi is sitting there even now. In all of these cases, the memory of a past Yuhi collapses into the present moment, such that her body is brought back to the place it once was, further disorienting the sense of time and space in the novel.

Eventually, Onni moves to Yuhi's now vacated bedroom, where even more memories return to life. At first Onni sits in the place she always occupied when she visited Yuhi in her room. As she continues to reminisce, however, she unfolds Yuhi's portable desk and sits at it as if she were Yuhi herself. This shift from attempts to recreate co-presence with Yuhi to what seems like an attempt to physically embody her occurs at a moment of frustration, when Onni is confronting the sheer weight of what she did not know about Yuhi and her experience. Upon entering the bedroom, Onni recalls a phone conversation she had with Yuhi earlier that day. Calling from the airport, Yuhi asks Onni to retrieve a packet of writing she left in the top drawer of her dresser because she could not bring herself to take it with her back to Japan. She tells her she can do as she pleases with it, either keeping it as a memento or disposing of it, but the question of her reading the text is moot. When Onni opens the dresser drawer, she finds an envelope stuffed with 448 pages of writing in Japanese. The bulk of this unknown and unknowable text in her hands testifies to all that Onni does not and could not understand about Yuhi. This woman she thought she knew intimately had the time and inclination to surreptitiously write 448 pages, and all in a language Onni herself cannot read. It is perhaps the chagrin she feels at this realization that causes her to try not only to bring Yuhi back but to become her, to attempt to see the world through her eyes.

Onni also attempts, quite literally, to speak in Yuhi's voice. Many of the instances in which she vicariously positions her body in spaces Yuhi occupied conjure not only a visual image of Yuhi's ghostly presence, but also resurrect the sound of her voice. Some of these moments are marked conspicuously in the text, as the recreation of Yuhi's voice is represented in *hangŭl*, which contrasts sharply with the surrounding Japanese characters. The first case of this occurs, again, in the blur of time and space in which Onni gazes up at the rocks on the mountains with the Yuhi of the past standing next to her. When sound is introduced to this confusing visual scene, it is in a similarly disorienting manner, the origins of the voice initially unclear: “바위 (岩) [*pawi* (rocks)]” (277). The first instance of dialogue in the novel is thus rendered in a bilingual textual mode familiar from the work of Kim Sŏkpŏm and his colonial predecessors. A word whose pronunciation is unclear is glossed with katakana that transcribes its Korean pronunciation, while a parenthetical gloss follows to fill in the meaning. Yi takes this practice a step further, however, by replacing the shared language of *sinographs* with the opacity of *hangŭl*, as if to emphasize the unbridgeable difference of the languages rather than their historical unity.

Furthermore, the text introduces this utterance without clarifying whose voice is producing it. The reader experiences a brief moment of uncertainty as to whether it is Onni spontaneously naming the rocks in her view, or whether the “Yuhi” standing beside her made this declaration in the past (or its phantasmic reproduction in the present). The answer turns out to be both, in a way. The quoted “*pawi*” is attributed as follows: “I recalled Yuhi’s voice and murmured the word, trying to mimic her pronunciation. I could still hear her voice as she stressed the *wi* sound, trying her best to pronounce it correctly, but sounding all the more awkward for her effort” (277). In the end, it remains possible to attribute the sound represented by these hangŭl to both the voice of Yuhi resurrected from the past and the voice of Onni performing that resurrection by embodying Yuhi, down to the sounds that came out of her mouth.

Nevertheless, the source of Onni’s frustration throughout the novel is that these efforts fail. She can no more speak in Yuhi’s voice than she can literally embody her, just as she is unable to decipher the Japanese text Yuhi leaves behind. Although the novel is presented in the form of pseudo-translation, it is thematically focused on the *impossibility* of transmission and communication rather than its potential. What Yi described as an effort to understand herself through the character of Yuhi, and what critics have described as a journey toward greater empathy for the *ihōjin* or the in-between subject,¹⁴ is, I would argue, anything but. The novel is rather a depiction of the limits of empathy as an ethical value founded on the assumption that the other can be understood. Whatever relationship Onni is able to have with Yuhi is necessarily built from at best a partial and fractured understanding of her emotions and experiences.

Onni herself even acknowledges the hubris of her presumption of understanding Yuhi. As she reflects on how she viewed Yuhi before the shock of her departure, she begins to see that her image of Yuhi was colored by her own self-consciousness. “Maybe I saw a bit of myself in her. Or maybe I unilaterally decided that she somehow resembled me, projecting my own brooding, introverted character onto her” (289). Onni provides anything but an “objective” perspective on Yuhi. Everything we know about Yuhi is filtered through Onni’s projections, or serves only to emphasize how little she knows—and how little we can know in the first place.

This failure of communication and mutual understanding is underscored in *Yuhi* through its emphasis on the incommensurability of speech, body, and text. As with other examples of Zainichi literature, *Yuhi* shows an outsized concern not only with language in general, but with the particularities of their spoken and written forms. This is yet another effect of the uncanny translator-narrator, whose presence brings into relief the pseudo-translation between speech and text that goes unremarked in most texts. Instead of an assumption of one-to-one correspondence between the sounds of the characters’ spoken dialogue, the narrative of *Yuhi* openly displays the multi-step process of “translation” undergone between the Korean “speech” of the characters and

the Japanese text of the final product. After the phonetically and semantically glossed hangŭl text of the first line of dialogue, the next lines occur in katakana transcription of Korean accompanied by parenthetical translations of meaning in Japanese, leaving out the hangŭl “original” (which is already a pseudo-translation of the original speech posited by the text):

ヌグセヨ?	(誰ですか)	Nuguseyo? (Who is it?)
...	...	
チヨエヨ	(私です)	Chō yeyo. (It's me.) (277)

This serves to establish that in the world of the story, Onni and her aunt are speaking to each other in Korean throughout. This device in place, the dialogue then immediately transitions to being presented more or less exclusively in Japanese “translation,” completing a progression from the purportedly strictly phonetic (though in this case unpronounceable for target readers) hangŭl, to the somewhat awkward phonetic transcription represented by the katakana, to a supposedly more transparent transcription of meaning rather than sound.

Exceptions to this rule, those points in the text when hangŭl or katakana-transcribed Korean language reemerge, have the effect of disrupting the narrative and causing the reader to pause and wonder why the particular language in question was untranslatable. Some Korean words, like *chōnse* (a large deposit made in lieu of rent), appear in katakana in dialogue exchanged between Onni and her aunt, presumably for lack of clear Japanese equivalents, and as a reminder of the linguistic setting of their speech. In other cases, particularly Onni's further recollections (or reenactments) of Yuhi's voice speaking Korean phrases such as “*이 나라 (この国)*” (*i nara* [this country]) and “*이 나라 사람 (この国の人)*” (*i nara saram* [this country's people]), the baggage involved in reproducing the Korean characters along with both interlinear and parenthetical glosses is clearly deployed for more weighty political purposes (282). The same goes for “*uri nara*,” which is similarly glossed as Onni repeats the words, again in Yuhi's voice, while tracing their corresponding hangŭl characters with her finger on the surface of Yuhi's written (but illegible) testament (300). Here, the hangŭl characters presented to the Japanese reader reproduce not only Onni's experience of confronting an illegible text, a text not meant for her, but also her embodied performance of tracing their shapes. The affective potential of these characters and the performance they generate stands in contrast to their inefficacy as conveyors of meaning in their function as text on a page.

An even better example of the affect of illegibility comes a few pages later, when Onni removes Yuhi's Japanese text from its envelope and encounters the written characters themselves. She states—paradoxically, as the statement appears in Japanese—that she cannot read a word of it, then nevertheless relates her feeling that the Japanese words on the page are speaking to her in Yuhi's voice:

I couldn't read a word of Japanese. There were some kanji that I knew. I tried to follow along with those characters and puzzle out what she was writing about. But I soon gave up. It was no use. Still, I couldn't take my eyes off it.

The characters [*moji*] were breathing.

They were looking up at me, speaking to me. Just looking at them, I could hear Yuhi's voice, the sound of it filling my head and rushing through my veins (308).

Somehow, despite her inability to translate those written characters into decipherable *meaning*, she is able to translate them into *sounds*. Moreover, the words on the page, described as "breathing," are personified, animated, perhaps even embodied. They affect Onni's body in turn.

This dynamic intensifies as Onni continues looking at the text she cannot read, still conjuring the image of Yuhi's body through her vicarious placement at her desk and proximity to this product of her hand. Eventually the sounds she "hears" take on more specific form:

'A, I, U, E, O.'

I knew these sounds. A, I, U, E, O, I whispered. I tried to make Yuhi say them too. Yuhi came to me in the form of the characters on the page, with their particular shapes and contours, whispering back at me. . . .

I looked around the room once more, feeling as if I had become Yuhi herself. Her words stared back at me as well (309).

This merging of text, voice, and body finally allows Onni to feel at one with Yuhi. Yet it is not through reading the text she left behind and understanding what she wrote that this comes about. Rather, it happens via her confrontation with what she cannot understand. She is able to reach out to Yuhi with her imagination, even if she cannot bridge the gap between them by communicating linguistically.

What I want to emphasize here is that this suggests a generalizable mode of "reading" texts. The acknowledgment of remnants outside what text is capable of representing—the voice, the body, the "other"—allows for a relaxation of the impulse to interpret or critique. Instead, the text can prompt its readers to imagine what is not represented. As we see with Onni, this can be a more ethical, less solipsistic exercise than an ultimately futile quest to mine the meaning from a text. That meaning, like Yuhi, may always be absent.

However, Onni's moment of oneness with Yuhi soon gives way to the anger and frustration that characterizes the narrative as a whole, upon the realization that she will never know what Yuhi has written in this text. She notes, with somewhat ironic phrasing, "I couldn't help thinking that Yuhi had revealed herself in these pages. That she had poured her heart and soul into these words, the innermost parts of herself that she never let anyone see. But all in Japanese" (309). What Onni speculates here is that Yuhi has written a confession of sorts, but one that

will never reach an audience, and therefore cannot function as a confession. It is a confession that is arrested in its pre-revealed state.

As the implications of Yuhi's refusal to share her inner life with her in legible form dawn on Onni, she continues:

I had felt so close to Yuhi, so connected to her. I had thought of her as a sister. And like a sister I had worried about her, commiserated with her, and sometimes I was even truly angry at her. I thought she cared for me like a sister too. I thought we both felt this way, that we were kindred spirits, drawn together by our mutual isolation.

But the whole time, Yuhi had been so far away.

Perhaps it was because I was so used to reading her writing in hangŭl, but somehow her writing in Japanese didn't seem unfamiliar to me. And yet the fact that she had sat here writing it, alone, was a testament to just how far away she had been. To the unbridgeable distance that remained between us (309).

Onni's anger throughout the novel arises essentially from the inaccessibility of this text and the distance it represents, a distance she had failed to recognize before Yuhi's sudden departure. The illegible text becomes an object of suspicion—like any text in the eyes of a critic—possibly precisely because it is produced at a distance. In contrast to the proximity of speech, text engenders a nagging skepticism in that the reader can never be sure that it is not a product of translation. Yuhi's written Korean, which Onni remarks is less awkward than her Korean speech, nonetheless reads as if it is translated directly from Japanese. Even if the text, in this case, is more apt to communicate meaning clearly, speech is still privileged as a means of accessing the authentic self. Its source absent, text betrays its own mediated quality.

Thus, the absence of Yuhi functions similarly to the floating positionality of the narrator-translator, in that they both preclude proximal access to the embodied speaking voice. The fundamental unknowability of these subjects, coupled with the unilateral desire to know them, gives rise to the anxiety of translation, or the anxiety of language itself. To return to Naoki Sakai's formulation of the subject in transit, the political work of transforming nonsense into sense is not confined to the realm of "translation proper," which is to say translation between two supposedly unified and mutually exclusive national languages. Rather, "translation introduces a disjunctive instability into the putatively *personal* relations among agents of speech, writing, listening and reading."¹⁵ In other words, the gap between speech and text, as with the gap between languages, comes into being at the moment of translation between the two. Translation disrupts not only the internal coherence of language communities but also the coherence of the speaking subject, even within a single language. To understand speech as a communicative medium offering transparent access to the self requires the assumption that embodied experience is translatable into speech. This, as we have seen, is impossible. There is a more fundamental inaccessibility that the corporeal mediation of language, as social act, overcomes.

Indeed, as Yuhi and Onni's stories demonstrate, speech as embodied practice has poietic qualities even if it is never translated out of incoherence. As the portion of the novel taking place in Yuhi's room comes to a close, Onni recalls the tone and rhythm of Yuhi reading Japanese aloud, which she would sometimes overhear from outside the room. At the same time, Onni clutches Yuhi's text to her chest, forging a connection between Yuhi's written and spoken words, even as she understands neither:

I was holding this bundle of Yuhi's writing in my arms. I felt like she had become the characters, and I was hugging her tightly to my chest. . . . The voice I was hearing was the characters. It was as if the words on the page had become audible sound. The pages I held to my chest seemed to reach through my body and touch [something within], making it cry out in Yuhi's voice from deep inside me (316).

Again, Onni's access to Yuhi's voice is not a product of her ability to translate between the written artifact she holds—the two may not even be commensurable in the first place. Instead, it is the bodily act of holding onto the text as tactile object that enables Onni to reanimate her own embodied memories of hearing Yuhi's voice. The text has this affective power even in the absence of meaning, but only insofar as it comes into contact with Onni's body, causing her to recall Yuhi's bodily state when she wrote it, or when she spoke in the voice that haunts it.

More often than not, her body was in pain. It is clear that Yuhi experiences the Korean language as an assault, often retreating to the safe haven of Japanese. In one instance, caught in a cacophony of Korean voices on a crowded city bus, Yuhi breaks down and starts muttering under her breath in Japanese. Onni, desperately trying to help her, eventually protests, "If you won't talk to me, I can't understand what's wrong" (306). Rather than responding, Yuhi drops her head to her knees and clasps both hands over her ears, trying to quiet the noise. Yuhi's visceral aversion to the sounds of the Korean language causes her to censure herself for her perceived betrayal of her national language and community, and plays no small part in giving rise to Onni's bitterness toward her.

In another case, a severely intoxicated Yuhi has another breakdown in speech, but this time compensates by writing in hangŭl rather than speaking in Japanese. She writes a line or two at a time, with Onni's reactions interspersed between, though it is not a conversation as such. One line of Yuhi's writing links continuously to the next without responding to Onni's dumbfounded interjections. Compiled together, they appear in the text as follows, the longest occurrence of glossed hangŭl in the novel:

オンニ
언니

Önni

チョン ウィソンジャ임니다
저는 위선자입니다

Chō nŭn wisōnja imnida

チョン コジンマルジャンイ임니다
저는 거짓말장이입니다

Chō nŭn kōjinmaljang'i imnida

(オンニ	(Onni
私は 偽善者です	I am a hypocrite
私は 嘘つきです)	I am a liar)
...	...
우리나라	Uri nara
(母国)	(Motherland)
...	...
사랑할 수 없습니다	Sarang hal su öpsümnida
(愛することができません)	(I cannot love it)
...	...
대금 좋아요	Taegüm choayo
대금소리는 우리말입니다	Taegüm sori nün uri mal imnida
(テグム 好きです	(I love the taegüm
テグムの音は 母語です)	The sound of the taegüm is my mother tongue [uri mal]) (313–14).

Here Yuhi's self-flagellation echoes the aphorism of the translator as traitor. And in fact, she is performing an act of translation by presenting these fragments of text to Onni. Perhaps they are a transcription of the Korean words she would have spoken, or perhaps they are direct translations from the Japanese words that might come more naturally to her—which the text of the novel then reproduces, but as a translation of the Korean text rather than the other way around.

In any case, the sense of suspicion, falseness, or hypocrisy ingrained in her use of the written Korean language comes from the sense that this language does not belong to her. Because she cannot love “uri nara”—glossed in Japanese as *bokoku* (motherland) but literally “our country”—she cannot apply the collective possessive pronoun “uri” to herself. To utter or even to write the words “uri nara” or “uri mal” (our language) would be to lie, to betray. Here the ambivalent antecedents of the translated words “this country” or “our country” have heavy emotional consequences.

This becomes especially poignant when Yuhi is explaining to Onni why she cannot stay in Korea and finish her degree. It is her hatred of spoken Korean that prevents her from remaining any longer:

At school, in the city, everywhere I go, the Korean everyone speaks—it's like tear gas. It burns, it stings. Just hearing it makes it hard to breathe. . . . I hated their voices. The voices of their actions, the voices of their gazes, the voices of their facial expressions, the voices of their bodies—I couldn't stand them. It was like breathing tear gas (321).

One can hardly begrudge Onni her anger at the offensive terms in which Yuhi describes Korea and its language. More suggestive, however, are the corporeal terms she employs here. It is not only literal speech that bothers her, but a much broader set of gestures and actions that she lumps in with spoken Korean. At the same time, these voices have physical as well as mental impacts, ostensibly disrupting the fundamental bodily act of breathing. Yuhi goes on to say that this hatred of the language—and her disgust with herself for harboring it—physically prevented her hand from moving to write the characters “uri nara” on an exam. This stutter in written form is the moment she decides she must return to Japan. A complex confluence of speech, writing, and embodied affect excise her from the “uri” of “uri mal” and ultimately the very space of “uri nara.”

HOMOSOCIALITY AND HOMOLINGUAL ADDRESS

This returns us to the question of spatial metaphor and the politics of belonging, as Yuhi feels that she was always somehow outside “uri nara” even as she was literally within it. In fact, as she is explaining her decision to leave and its connection to the Korean language soundscape, she redraws the boundaries of *where* she was during the novel: “I like the sound of the Korean you and Oba speak. Just knowing there were people who spoke that kind of Korean made it worth staying in this country (*kono kuni*). Or at least staying in this house. Maybe I was never really in this country, just in this house” (315).

Of course, the exception she carves out for Onni and Oba as she expresses her disdain for the Korean language does little to temper this statement. Onni’s offense is understandable, especially when considered against the backdrop of Yuhi’s larger pattern of painting Korea with a broad brush. Onni’s recollections of Yuhi voicing the words “i nara” (this country) and “i nara saram” (this country’s people) are particularly painful, as Yuhi always follows these words with stereotypes, stated definitively as if she is an authority. This leaves Onni galled not only at Yuhi’s presumption of qualification to speak for or about Korea and its people, but also certain that Yuhi would revise her negative view of the country if only she would get to know it better. One wonders just how much knowledge would be required for a statement beginning with “This country’s people . . .” not to end in a similarly totalized and presumptuous fashion. Instead, the real root of this tension is the troubled logic of representation. The limited cross section of Korea that Yuhi has experienced cannot possibly stand for the richer and more complex whole, but this whole cannot be grasped without flattening out its nuances. This may be what Yuhi is getting at when she says that if she was in a particular space, it was the house, not the country.

However, tracing Yuhi’s path to arriving in the house—as well as the country—complicates this picture somewhat. As Onni and Oba learn when they first meet her, Yuhi has moved out of many boarding houses and rooms for rent already,

though she is not eager to say why. Months after she moves in, and unbeknownst to Onni, Yuhi gives her aunt a glimpse into the problems she faced in previous housing situations. She describes an altercation between a former landlord's two sons that starts over a minor disagreement and turns violent, eventually resulting in one of the brothers punching through the window of the house's front door. Yuhi is shocked that this would happen right before her eyes—and that her fellow tenants are not taken aback—but Oba has trouble holding back laughter as she tells the story. The normalcy of this kind of toxic masculinity drives her toward a female-only house.

Similarly, it is a fraught reaction to patriarchy that drives Yuhi to Korea in the first place. In another reveal made via Oba rather than Onni, Yuhi explains that her father was once swindled by a fellow Korean in Japan, such that any mention of Korea he made to his family thereafter was to malign it. This also meant that her family tried aggressively to assimilate into Japanese society, with Yuhi attending Japanese schools and only belatedly awakening to her Korean identity. At some level, it is her father's recent death that prompts her journey "back" to Korea, an attempt to rehabilitate the country in her mind after so much negative indoctrination. Yuhi's love-hate relationships with Korea, then, cannot be disentangled from the same conflicted emotions she holds toward her father.

An underexplored aspect of the novel, then, is the homosociality of the space where it all takes place. The house is distinguished by the palpable absence of men. Oba's husband, whom she describes as a Korean nationalist, harboring anti-Japanese sentiments originating in the colonial period, is dead. Her married daughter has emigrated to the United States with her husband. Onni is unmarried in her thirties, a state that is treated as almost pathological by those around her. Yuhi's father has passed away, as noted above, and she leaves behind brothers in Japan. If the house lends her a sense of belonging unavailable to her in the larger Korea outside (or for that matter in Japan), then it has as much to do with gender as national identity. At the same time, the way Yuhi and Oba discuss their departed father and husband, respectively, both unable to fully accept the nationalist or assimilationist outlooks they represented, illustrates the intersecting and contradictory allegiances that Korean women must navigate on either side of the straits.

However, the homosociality between these women exists on a continuum that slides into homoerotic territory as well.¹⁶ Beyond Onni's unmarried status and the way she describes her inability to connect with others, the narrative drops hints that her fascination with Yuhi goes beyond sisterly affection, including her constant remarks on Yuhi's mesmerizing androgynous appearance. This possibly sexual tension comes to a head when Onni attempts to hold Yuhi's hand on an outing, a culturally normative practice between young women in Korea but not in Japan. Despite understanding the cultural difference in question, Yuhi is uncomfortable with the touch. The novel leaves plenty of space to interpret this as just one

more instance of Yuhi's general discomfort with Korea and experience of culture shock, often portrayed as a will to guard her body against the sensations of being in Korea. Yet it is also possible to read this awkward moment as an unspoken and subconscious realization by both women that Onni's affinity for Yuhi is not strictly sisterly. Whether it verges on the erotic or not, Onni's desire for Yuhi—including desire for bodily closeness—goes a long way toward explaining the obsessive bitterness or even rage that characterizes her reaction to Yuhi's departure.

This anger at Yuhi's disappearance and the shattering of the family these three women created is connected to deeper anxieties Onni and Oba share about their actual family. Yuhi's leaving is perhaps a painful reminder of the absence of Oba's daughter. As if to confirm this emotional overlap, the day Yuhi leaves Oba calls her daughter at an unreasonable hour for her time zone and talks for so long that Onni retires for the evening before the conversation ends. The daughter's migration to the United States is one of many subtle background reminders of Cold War vectors of power in the story. Yuhi's very ability to come to Korea is a product of Japan's economic dominance in the region, itself enabled by American Cold War policy. Oba vacillates between relief that Yuhi does not conform to the stereotyped image of Zainichi Koreans as lavish consumers of Seoul's nightlife and vague apprehension that she may sympathize with the communist North. In this way she serves as a reminder of not only this family's geographical separation, but also South Korea's place in the geopolitical order, particularly the division of the peninsula along ideological and geographical lines.

This politics of the fractured nation—so often, as here, read allegorically onto the fractured family—collides with the politics of sexuality at the site of Onni's body. Her refusal or inability to perform her reproductive duty to the patriarchal nation-state exacerbates her and Oba's anxiety over their disappearing family.¹⁷ The intersecting imperial histories and intersecting normative demands on her body turn Yuhi's absence into a personal and political disaster. If Onni is angry at Yuhi's failure to assimilate as a proper Korean national subject, then this necessarily overlaps with her failure (in the eyes of her father) to assimilate into proper Japanese national subjectivity, and with Onni's own perceived shortcomings as a Korean woman, including but not limited to her failure to reproduce the family and the nation. As with Yuhi's conclusion that she cannot use the collective possessive “uri” because she does not belong to the Korean “we,” neither does Onni in any neat or unproblematic way. The difference is one of mobility: whereas Yuhi escaped, Onni cannot.

This opposition between stasis and movement brings us to the enigmatic conclusion of the novel, where Yuhi discusses her “language crutch” (*kotoba no tsue*). She uses this metaphor—once again latching onto the figurative language of disability—to describe her own feelings of stasis within language. She tells Onni that when she first wakes up every morning, a sound like “ah” escapes her lips, falling somewhere between the sound of breathing and the sound of spoken language. As it happens, this sound also falls between the Japanese and Korean languages.

Both syllabaries begin with this same vowel sound. Thus, when Yuhi awakens from dreams, she stands fixed at the crossroads of the two languages:

Is it an ^ㅏㅏ, or is it an ^ㅓㅓ? If it's an ^ㅏㅏ, then I grab the crutch that goes ^ㅏㅏ, ^ㅓㅓ, ^ㅓㅓ, ^ㅓㅓ. But if it's an ^ㅓㅓ, then it's the crutch that goes ^ㅓㅓ, ^ㅓㅓ, ^ㅓㅓ, ^ㅓㅓ. But I never know for sure if it's an ^ㅏㅏ or an ^ㅓㅓ. It's always been that way. And it just keeps getting harder to tell which it is. I can't grab the crutch (335).

Although this passage is represented as dialogue in the text, notably it would be difficult for Yuhi to convey the sense of this to Onni through speech alone, since it is impossible to distinguish between ^ㅏㅏ and ^ㅓㅓ in spoken language without some additional reference or gesture. This ^ㅏㅏ/^ㅓㅓ, then, is the site of intersection of Japanese and Korean, of speech and text, and as Yuhi suggests here, of sense and nonsense. It is the primordial speech act prior to the coherence imposed by the systematized ordering of sounds in a syllabary. She cannot linger in this pre-linguistic space, even as proceeding along one path and abandoning the other entails a sense of pain and loss.

The metaphor of the crutch frames this ordering of nonsense into sense as the device that enables her mobility in the language, but it is unclear that such mobility is an improvement over the momentary stasis of the ^ㅏㅏ/^ㅓㅓ. Even if this nonsensical sound cannot be translated into meaning that could make Yuhi understood, it does provide the potential for an embodied empathy that does not require being understood. The novel closes with Onni uttering her own ^ㅏㅏ, whereupon she feels unable to walk, “as if my crutch were taken from me” (335). She also finds that the sounds that should continue from the ^ㅏㅏ do not come to her, as if she too is uncertain whether this sound exists in Korean or Japanese—the latter completely unknown to her, a wall that cuts her off from Yuhi.

There can be no doubt that this is an empathetic moment. Onni shares with Yuhi the emotional experience of searching for a language crutch, and either not finding it, or not finding it particularly enabling. The “ah” sound they both make will never act as a medium for mutual understanding, but it can offer an embodied connection based on mutual experience. Perhaps they are both feeling the frustration of in-betweenness and non-belonging in this moment, and Onni is finally able to understand Yuhi's plight. But what the collapse of ^ㅏㅏ into ^ㅓㅓ suggests is that there is no gap for Yuhi to occupy, no two bounded entities to fall between. Instead, I would propose that what Yuhi and Onni experience here, in the moment before sound becomes language, is the radical social act of encountering the incommensurable.

. . .

To conclude, I want to point to one other potential basis for solidarity between Onni and Yuhi that runs parallel to communication and mutual experience: shared history. As with their views of Korea as a whole, the two women's understandings

of Korean history overlap and conflict, one of many sources of tension in the novel. One of the more uncomfortable moments when this contestation of history comes to the surface happens in the realm of literary history in particular. Upon learning that Onni majored in Korean literature in college, Yuhi asks about the topic of her thesis. Onni responds that she wrote on Yi Sang, and in the course of their conversation asks Yuhi which Korean authors she likes. She replies, abashedly, that she does not read much fiction in Korean because it is difficult for her, but that the author who intrigues her the most is Yi Kwangsu.

The awkwardness of this exchange is due to the very different connections these two women have to the Korean literary past. Yi Sang is perhaps the most revered writer of the colonial period, but died before Japanese mobilization for total war and thus never confronted the dilemmas presented by the loss of the Korean language and the collapse of artistic freedom. Yi Kwangsu, on the other hand, embodies all of the messiness that Yi Sang avoids. By mentioning him here, Yuhi explicitly positions herself as the heir to these contradictions and failures. It is the first hint she gives of her betrayal of the Korean nation, linking her own assimilation and affinity for Japan to collaboration with imperialism. Perhaps it would not be unfair to say that *Yuhi* goes further than any other work we have seen to make this link explicit, to position Zainichi literature as an alternate future for colonial Korean literary history: for some a dystopia in which the Japanese assimilation project and disappearance of literature in the Korean language are carried out; for others, the condition of possibility for a kind of writing outside the burden of representation for a monolithic nation or linguistic community.