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North Korea So Far: Distance and Intimacy, Seen and Unseen

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North Korea So Far
Distance and Intimacy, Seen and Unseen

by

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ABSTRACT /

This is a project that seeks to broaden the spatial, conceptual, and ethnographic terrain on which north Korea can be encountered. In order to imagine and undertake anthropological fieldwork that approaches north Korea in this way, a seemingly inaccessible place, a seemingly insurmountable task, I had to look obliquely, from multiple vantage points, to infinitely approach, but not subsume the elusive "object" that is north Korea.

I take on the problematic of seeing in this *dis-located* fieldsite, what it entails, the risks, limits, and possibilities. I mobilize a method of "peripheral vision" to trouble the assumption that the "real" north Korea is "totalitarian" or that the "real" north Korea is "the most dangerous place on earth," that the "real" is something to be uncovered or exposed by a certain vigilant, scrutinous "hyper focused" observation. In contrast to this limited view of vision, my work explores what happens when seeing is expanded in all of its embodied, relational, philosophical, ontological, and sensory capacities. Photography and experimental modes of writing are central to this endeavor, which I mobilize from a negative space of becoming, rather than through the logic of representation.

The research proceeds in multiple contexts within north Korea proper, as well as in places and times both distant and intimate. As a visitor to north Korea, there was an immediate and intimate connection in our Koreanness, but also a vast and unbridgeable distance within the same sentiment. As an instructor at the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology, there was life in a closed, closely monitored campus, but the people who were "minding" me, my students, the administrative staff, the Foreign Affairs officials, blurred these lines of enclosure and division. These kinds of relations and encounters are not things that can be readily observed, nor are they experiences hidden from view. These are scenes that only come into view peripherally, unfolding in the margins, in the spaces between and within rules and prohibitions, lingering in whispered questions on a soccer field, handwritten notes passed through the hands of others, half formed responses to ambiguous questions, and drunken exchanges in late night Pyongyang, seen and unseen.

In Yangjiri, a south Korean village bordering the DMZ, the north can be encountered through echoes. When attuning to the sound of the loudspeaker broadcasts that echo across the border, north Korea appears through loss, longing, curiosity, anxiety, evoking an ambivalent and paradoxical image, unlike the ritual of seeing through binoculars, from observatory platforms, on dioramas and maps, which too precisely aims to locate the other side. In Kazakhstan, north Korea emerges through the memory of the Soviet Korean diaspora that lived the time of Korea as an Asian frontier of socialism, a time before the division. In the Sino-Korean borderland, from which I could peer across the river from one socialism to another, there was a postsocialist nostalgia to heed to, the space of an intimate gap, where the sultry resin of socialism and its afterlives are made visible from a broken bridge, a rupture.

From these various peripheries, no matter how distant and fragmented the seeing, my hope is that north Korea feels nonetheless intimate and viscerally presenced. It is in this sense that I say, north Korea so far.

For my parents,
who showed me that home is both possible and impossible, everywhere

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across many domains, I am always in awe and grateful to be included. Laura Nelson, our cozy seminar workshops, the way you cultivated an environment of care really left an impression on me, and your comments on early drafts really pushed things along. Hyun-Gwi Park, I love being in a shared momentum with you, looking forward to more of this to come. In the Department of Anthropology, it is the guidance of Ned Garrett and Tabea Mastel that brings me to the end of the program with grace, as well as Cori Hayden, Bill Hanks, Charles Hirschkind, James Holston, Laura Nader, Rosemary Joyce, and Nelson Graburn who were formative in many ways.

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CONTENTS /

INTRODUCTION /
DIS-LOCATED FIELDSITE

This dissertation follows a number of movements across intimate time and distant space that approach north Korea as an elusive object, seen and unseen. The chapters that compose it are each in and out of north Korea, in and out of focus, openings not to a north Korea located, but of a north Korea so far.

There is no direct, easy, frictionless way to name "North Korea" because to name it fundamentally involves a politics. The designation of the country positions you in a geopolitics, whether North Korea, in the Euro-American reality, or 북한, from the gaze of the south, or the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK), DPR Korea, 북조선 or 조선민주주의인민공화국 as preferred in the north. As Shine Choi says, these are not terms of "direct correspondence," but rather a radical disjuncture, "a contest of whose story of the country should be believed."[1]

My use of the lowercase "n" in "north Korea" is therefore intentional. I mark my ambivalence and the impossible confrontation with naming this place through the pause made possible by "n," in order to make felt that dis-location. It is to leave open the past, present, and future of Korea as a place that we have not fully arrived at yet, whereas capitalizing "N" would over emphasize inevitability and finality. Here I take cues from scholarly writings that date back to the early days of the division, when "north" was not yet "North," as if to suggest the temporary nature of the split, and also draw from a more recent example on the topic of unification and the unfinished war, where "north" appears again as a ghostly reminder.[2] The "n" embodies the dis-located nature of writing about a place like north Korea, only further amplified by the fact that there is no capitalization in the Korean language.

I also demonstrate my hesitation and conflicted position in relation to the field and conventions of Korean Studies (in which north Korea is generally excluded) by choosing not to follow the McCune-Reischauer romanization system.[3] I utilize instead both the northern and southern romanization systems as well as the more unruly, inconsistent forms in wide circulation that are more or less determined on a case by case basis. In this sense too, it is a reckoning with a north Korea so far.

My "field," therefore, is less a bounded place, and more like the transient spaces of travel that James Clifford envisions: "a hotel lobby, urban café, ship, or bus."[4] I add the airport in the

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[1] See Shine Choi, *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics: Problems and Alternatives* (Routledge, 2014), 1.

[2] In my use of "north," I am in the company of Shannon McCune, "The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea," *World Politics* 1, no. 2 (1949): 223–32; "Korea: Geographic Parallels, 1950-1960," *Journal of Geography* 59, no. 5 (May 1960): 201–6; Roy Richard Grinker, *Korea and Its Futures: Unification and the Unfinished War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

[3] I too reflect Shine Choi's "uneasy relationship with the academic Korean studies field." See "Note on translation" in the introduction to her book *Re-Imagining North Korea in International Politics*.

[4] Clifford articulates these transient spaces of travel in tension with the notion of residence, to be at home in "a tent in a village or a controlled laboratory or a site of initiation and inhabitation." See *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997), 25. See also Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson on the notion of "shifting locations" or "location-work" that fieldwork as "a self-conscious shifting of social and geographical location can be an extraordinarily valuable methodology for understanding social and cultural life, both through the discovery of phenomena that would otherwise remain invisible and through the acquisition of new perspectives on things we thought we already understood" in "Discipline and Practice: 'The Field' as Site, Method,

vignettes that follow, a place that is also similarly both enough and too much, a there and a not there, because it is both inside and outside north Korea that I enter it as a place. So this is a way to "get us some distance" to north Korea before inevitably being faced again with its impossible reach.[5]

> One only knows a spot once one has experienced it in as many dimensions as possible. You have to have approached a place from all four cardinal points if you want to take it in, and what's more, you also have to have left if from all these points. Otherwise it will quite unexpectedly cross your path three or four times before you are prepared to discover it.

Susan Buck-Morss cites this passage from Walter Benjamin's *Moscow Diary* to link his "transient existence" as the "structure that locates the *Passagen-Werk* geographically, in the "null point" between the axis of Berlin-Naples/Paris-Moscow, "the one indicating the advance of empirical history…the other defining history retrospectively as the ruins of an unfulfilled past."[6] Just as Buck-Morss reminds us that "it must not be forgotten that there is no *Passagen-Werk*," I similarly locate this project in an absent-presence, these chapters that traverse north Korea from different dimensions and varying perspectives, but that "comprise no totality" of north Korea, that never come to a full stop.[7]

The null point opens to the dis-located clearing in which these six chapters take form, invoking what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls a "praxes of intervals, Third-terms, in-betweens, many twos, twilight and middle grays, outside-in or inside-out movements."[8] And it is here that I begin with the figure of a traveling self in the transient space, in the monochrome time of an airport in four movements.

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and Location in Anthropology," in *Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science* (University of California Press, 1997), 36–38.

[5] Clifford describes the notion of "travel" as "Enough. Too much" to ground the term in its "historical taintedness," the way it inherently holds a "taint of location by class, gender, race, and a certain literariness." See *Routes*, 39.

[6] Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (MIT Press, 1991), 25–26. See also Walter Benjamin, *Moscow Diary* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 25.

[7] *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, 47–48.

[8] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *D-Passage: The Digital Way* (Duke University Press, 2013), 67.

FIRST

Beijing.

At the gate for our very delayed flight to Pyongyang. The once anxious queue turns into restless waiting, sitting around, endless trips to the vending machine.

I leave my things with the group to wander around.

I notice the departures board.
There are flights to Pyongyang, Busan, and Seattle from this gate?
Something about these places coexisting in this terminal took me by surprise.
Was anyone else perplexed by this?
Because for me, north Korea is not a place like Seattle is a place or Busan is a place.
It feels so far away.

The Beijing airport is a singularity like this.

So many curious juxtapositions, and unlike anywhere else, here it is part of the everyday.

SECOND

Sometimes it happens at the Beijing Airport that south and north Koreans cross paths.

A scene comes together as I stand behind a group of south Korean *ajusshis* in the immigration line. They are unmistakably southern in bright, colorful outdoor gear, cheerfully bantering, clearly on a trip. Then another group of *ajusshis* get in line behind me, obviously northern with Leader badges perfecting their old school communist look.

Oh, this is going to be interesting.

I notice the northerners notice the southerners first. They seem more curious more than anything, their eyes lit up when they heard the distant but familiar speech of the other Korea. As the line moves, everyone shuffling along the back and forth of the queue, I notice the southerners notice the northerners approaching. They seem struck by fear, their eyes turn to stone. Their banter turns to a whisper, as if they don't want to be identified. The guy holding the kimchi cooler puts his arm around what appears to be the elder of the group, to shield him from the gaze of the northerners.

But no, they cannot encounter one another.

THIRD

Summer is over.

I pack the many things I've accumulated over the many weeks.
Beijing, Pyongyang, back to Beijing, then Seoul.
Moving between Pyongyang and Seoul through Beijing is always unsettling.

One of the last things I try to fit in my suitcase are two bronze replicas of the Korean Worker's Party Monument. One for my advisor and one for myself. I barely manage to jam one into the checked luggage bag and at the last minute decide to put the other one in my carry on camera bag, carefully wrapped in a knit scarf.

I'm stopped at airport security in Incheon.

The young official wants to inspect the metal object in my bag. At first I think it is the usual ritual with the camera inspection, but suddenly remember the Worker's Party monument and begin to panic.

He unravels the scarf revealing the heavy metal object from another world.
He has a curious look on his face.
He reads the inscription: 조선-평양 관광기념
He asks me to wait.

There is now a group of security officers huddled over this object, examining it, scanning it, whispering.

They ask for my passport, see that I'm a US citizen, then ask me in English, what is it?

A gift from a friend, a souvenir, I say.

They look at one another, furrowing unconvinced, then shrug their shoulders and wave me on.

FOURTH

Pyongyang.

We board the plane. My seat is next to a woman exquisitely dressed in a black skirt suit. I see the Leader badge, she is north Korean.

We don't talk much, only exchanging the usual niceties as passengers seated together on a flight. Smiling, saying thank you, passing meal trays. I am wearing sunglasses and too emotionally depleted to attempt a conversation, though I am curious, what takes her to Beijing?

It isn't until I see her on the other side that it strikes me.

She is waiting at the luggage carousel, but has removed her badge. She is no longer identifiable, no longer north Korean, in a way no longer reachable, just another nameless traveler moving through an airport.

CHAPTER 1 /
IN AND OUT OF FOCUS

On my first trip to north Korea, I find myself caught in a red between.
The airport officials don’t take our phones.

They don’t open my bag, pat me down, or put me through an X-ray machine.
They don’t ask me to remove my heavy coat and boots.
They don’t seem bothered by my slow, confused movements.
They don’t take my phone, which I thought they surely would.

Nothing happens.

I suppose I imagined something else, something aggressively redder under the gaze of the Leaders that watch from the walls.

Our guide greets us on the other side of airport security.

He sees us holding phones and is just as surprised.
It’s the first opening on this side.

BLIND SPOT

The trouble with seeing north Korea is that we try to see it too clearly, too closely, too much in isolation.

We see through the red filter—

Rogue nation
Totalitarian nightmare
The most mysterious, dangerous country on earth

We see red as red but do not see the distance between reds—

So it is not that the world appears the same, only in red, but that there is a whole other world, composed of different histories, logics, aesthetics, affects.

This is not a world that comes into view in the hyper focus of the "real," where one can see the truth of life *outside* the rules, rituals, and scripts, or *behind* the curtain on the "stage" of the "theater state," a north Korea exposed.[9] This is instead a seeing in and out of focus within saturations, intensities, and contrasts, a north Korea that is only visible through an intimate distance, seen and unseen.

[9] The aim of these approaches is to see through the spectacle, the fantasy, to get to the real. For instance, as Suk-Young Kim has said, "In the master plan of the North Korean tourist industry, its natural and cultural landscape becomes a stage on which the state directs the movement of its people and foreign tourists. In this totalizing scheme, tourists and intended to be silent and compliant spectators" (261). In her analysis of state performances, she reads its "symbolic structure" like "a text" in the Geertzian sense, though she does not draw from a Geertzian framework. See Suk-Young Kim, *Illusive Utopia: Theater, Film, and Everyday Performance in North Korea* (University of Michigan Press, 2010); Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 412–53. Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung follow Geertz's assertion that "the symbolic, demonstratively ritual and theatrical dimension of state power is constitutive rather than merely representative of the political order" (64). See Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012); Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State In Nineteenth-Century Bali* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981).

Like other places in the city, we arrive through an alley, a corridor, a stairway, a passage that takes us to another space. I never quite know where I am.

It is intoxicating, smoky from the charred skewered lamb, warm from the tables of charcoal, a welcome reprieve from the freezing temperatures outside.

It feels like a room within a room, the lighting dim, as if lit by a single lightbulb.

A man tends to the charcoal. His thick winter coat, gloves, and hat, protect him from the Siberian winds that fill the room every time he opens the door.

We finish our food, drink our beer, and at last have a moment to take it all in. But what? What to take away from this experience? Everyone feels tense but no one knows why.

That's when the reverie of dancing and singing begins. Four women appear, dressed in crisp mauve and white uniforms, hair tied up in ponytails, all sparkling eyes and smiles. They perform a short dance number before grabbing the arms of the men. They have done this before. With one on the accordion, another on the karaoke machine, the room soon becomes another kind of room.

I sit bemused, noticing the shifting scene, until I am dragged out from my seat and urged to sing. Arirang, this is the one song that all Koreans should know, north or south or anywhere else, and of course this is the song I have to sing, only I don't know it, don't know it by heart like I should know it.

I was already on the makeshift stage, standing alone, microphone in hand, the music cueing, everyone waiting.

Not letting me suffer in the spotlight for too long, he takes the other microphone, his confident voice reclaiming the dignity of the song.

We sit together for one last celebratory beer.
We drink to a united Korea.
He tells me I'm a terrible singer.

I notice the warmth of the place again.

He asks if I told my parents that I was coming here. Apparently, many travelers say they couldn't tell their families because it would worry them too much.

He finds this ridiculous. What do they think would happen?
That tomorrow all of the headlines would read:
"Lisa Min kidnapped in North Korea."

My heart stops.

He dies with red laughter.

It was a bus long ride to Kaesong. One of our Korean guides was sitting with the Western guide, watching some kind of Hollywood action film on his Macbook Pro. I sat across the aisle from them, towards the front of the bus, listening to Kino on my headphones. Kino, the legendary Soviet rock band from the 80s with a charismatic half-Korean front man. They are known for their poetic, subversive lyrics and to this day remain popular in the former Soviet world.

It was hot. People were making small talk, flirting, sleeping, reading, zoning out. I sought a much-needed break from the intensity of the whole thing.

I sat with the music, shut off from the surroundings, staring out the window at the endless rice fields, when suddenly I wondered if he had heard of Kino. Without much thought, I just turned around and asked him.

At first he didn't seem to understand the reference, so I explained that it was a Soviet rock band, that the lead singer was named Viktor Tsoi, making the distinction as 최 빅토르, because his name is pronounced differently in Korean, and he eventually said, yes yes, I know about him. I have heard some songs, but not many. Without thinking, I handed him my phone and pushed play. Not a minute later, he excitedly tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I could copy this for him. How many songs do you have? I have a USB.

I was surprised that he knew Kino, that he liked the music so much, that he asked for a copy, that there was a flash drive on his key chain, and that we could so openly talk about this on the bus. Kino, after all, is known for their subversive lyrics! Again, without much thought, I said, of course, I have the entire discography on my phone.

I didn't have the right cords, so we walked to the back of the moving bus to see if one of the other tourists could take the music off of my phone and transfer it to his flash drive. While we were waiting, he handed me his mp3 player. It was his favorite song. It was not about the Great Leader. I told him I wanted it.

While all of this was unfolding, I was temporarily in a world that had nothing to do with "north Korea." Here was a person who shared my love for Kino. It was as simple as that. Only later, when I began to reflect upon what had happened, did I begin to doubt this.

Did I make a mistake? I remember reading somewhere that it's illegal for north Koreans to have possession of foreign media. Was he going to get in trouble for this? Have I done something I shouldn't have? But in the moment, it all seemed a perfectly acceptable thing to do.

We walked towards the Juche Tower, trailing behind the rest of the group.

He asked:
What year were you born?
(The answer will determine the level of formality with which one should engage the other person.)

Ah, we're the same age.
(This produced an immediate ease.)

When is your birthday?
(An exacting question to determine who is technically older, as it shapes the nature of the relationship.)

He said:
Mine is on an important day, the same day as Karl Marx's.
Don't you know it?
(No in fact I did not know it and was completely taken aback by the mention of Marx. I was under the impression that Marx was no longer relevant in the north.)

The Juche Tower with its eternally glowing red flame is the beating heart of the country. It is a major stop on almost every tourist itinerary. It overlooks the Taedong River, and is positioned opposite Kim Il Sung square on the other side. The tower was commissioned by Dear Leader Kim Jong Il and was completed in 1982 in commemoration of Kim Il Sung's 70th birthday, built with 25,550 granite blocks that represent each day in the Leader's life. A five euro ride to the top of the 170 meter tower gives way to one of the best views of Pyongyang.

Across the street from the Juche Tower, around a bend, tucked behind an alley, is the popular Taedonggang Brewery No. 2. Having already had the pleasure of going up the tower on previous visits, I suggested to both the Western guide and the Korean guide that we go for a quick drink while the others went on.

Then there we were.

Neither of them really wanted to go up the tower again anyway.

HYPER FOCUSED VISION

Hyper focused vision seeks to reveal the concealed truth about north Korea. It zooms in on the rules and all of the things one cannot, one must not do. In the face of totalizing restrictions, and limitations, there is no room to see anything else, no space to listen, no reason to be surprised, to remain open, to inhabit all of the spaces around and between the rules, the unknown, and the not yet.

Hyper focused vision looks to the latest publication that claims to unveil something new. This time, it's an on-the ground glimpse into the emerging market economy, that "[f]ar from the stereotype of total economic isolation, the black market has brought a surprising degree of modernity and consumerism – for some."[10] It points to the emergence of a moneyed elite, suggesting a kind of nascent form of political transformation where capitalist consumption ties one to modernity and liberal democratic values such as freedom, the citizen subject, human rights, and a politics of dissent.[11]

Hyper focused vision seeks to verify. Will the north Korean political system "survive the disruptive force that a market economy poses."[12] This of course has been the central question posed by north Korea "watchers" since the dissolution of the Soviet Union when state socialism lost legitimacy as a viable possible future.[13] But to insist that the country's market based economics makes irrelevant its connection to the socialist project, is to sidestep the difficult task of understanding the work of ideology, political power, and history altogether. State socialism has been proclaimed dead, and yet its reverberations persist, as anomalies, nostalgia, sensoria, and afterlives, as latent intensities and material residues of an era past, remnants and fragments that don't just go away. These echoes, perhaps, are what make the question of socialist survivals "at once so infuriating and so vital to the liberal imagination,"

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[10] See the article "Shopping in Pyongyang, and other Adventures in North Korean Capitalism" in the *New York Times*: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/14/magazine/north-korea-black-market-economy.html?rref=collection%2Ftimestopic%2FNorth Korea&action=click&contentCollection=world&region=stream&module=stream_unit&version=search&contentPlacement=1&pgtype=collection (accessed September 2019) and also the book by Travis Jeppesen, *See You Again in Pyongyang: A Journey into Kim Jong Un's North Korea* (New York, NY: Hachette Books, 2018). When read alongside Daniel Tudor and James Pearson's *North Korea Confidential: Private Markets, Fashion Trends, Prison Camps, Dissenters and Defectors* (Tokyo ; Rutland, Vermont ; Singapore: Tuttle Publishing, 2015) one can note the emerging genre of post-famine (고난의 행군) marketization literature.

[11] Defector testimony is typically woven into this narrative, with prohibitions on certain practices of consumption linked to restrictions on freedom, conveyed by sentiments such as "we couldn't wear jeans" or "we couldn't wear red lipstick." For examples, see https://www.pri.org/stories/2015-09-29/why-young-north-koreans-are-daring-wear-skinny-jeans and https://www.cnn.com/style/article/north-korea-womens-beauty-freedom/index.html (accessed December 2020).

[12] From the same article mentioned above "Shopping in Pyongyang, and other Adventures in North Korean Capitalism" in the *New York Times*

[13] My main frame of reference for the idea of a viable future is informed by Susan Buck-Morss's *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (MIT Press, 2002). One critical lesson from this text is an understanding that capitalism too lost its dream of industrial utopia, its sense of a future, in this very moment.

that is, the obsession and investment in north Korea's collapse is at once a symptom and fundamental necessity of liberal capitalism.[14]

Hyper focused vision sees north Korea as a place where "everything is forbidden," though no matter how focused, there is something present in the periphery that blurs this notion, "*unless it is allowed*."[15] A well-known British tour guide explains that "[i]n most countries, you are generally permitted to do anything you want, unless there is a law forbidding it…[i]n the D.P.R.K., it is the opposite: Everything is forbidden, until you are told that it is allowed."[16] This seems straight forward enough, effortlessly encapsulating what we already imagine about north Korea. Yet there is a lingering suggestion of something, that everything is forbidden *unless* or *until* something is no longer forbidden. And a space opens up.

Most interestingly, a hyper focused gaze often observes rich ethnographic material that portrays a much more complex social, political, and economic reality:

> Myong Hwa looks after all the French students studying at Kim Il Sung University…Last time Alexandre was in Pyongyang, he and Myong Hwa forged a special bond. She even bent the rules and helped clandestinely arrange for him to have dinner one night with a business man he had met at a North Korea restaurant in Dubai.[17]
>
> Later, we drive to a local laundry shop, where Roe covertly drops off a bag of our dirty clothes. It's not allowed, but it'll be much cheaper than what they charge at the hotel, and since none of us have packed blue jeans or clothing with American flag insignia, Roe can pretend it's his own.[18]
>
> The day ends with another sporadic appearance by Comrade Kim… "I want to show you my favorite bar in Pyongyang," he tells us in the van. The joint he takes us to is brand-new, hidden down an alleyway behind the Tower of the Juche Idea on the eastern banks of the Taedong River.[19]

There are moments like this everywhere, in every scene, but a hyper focused vision cannot see it, does not attend to it, cannot move beyond the blind spot to be able to envision the world that comes into view because of and despite the rules.

Hyper focused vision begins with a binary. Alexei Yurchak has discussed at length the kinds of assumptions projected onto the Soviet subject by certain liberal renderings of Soviet socialism. This is a figure upon which problematic distinctions between truth and lie, state and people, official economy and black market economy, official culture and counterculture, repression and freedom and so on have been "implicitly and explicitly reproduced" within a framework of

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[14] See William Mazzarella, "Totalitarian Tears: Does the Crowd Really Mean It?," *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 1 (February 17, 2015): 94; William Mazzarella, "The Myth of the Multitude, or, Who's Afraid of the Crowd?," *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 4 (2010): 697–727; Dominic Boyer, "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany," *Public Culture* 18, no. 2 (2006): 361–81.

[15] Emphasis mine. See the review essay by historian Sheila Miyoshi Jager, "North Korea: Where everything is forbidden unless it is allowed": https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/13/books/review/travis-jeppesen-see-you-again-in-pyongyang-north-korea.html (accessed September 2019.

[16] The British tour guide is Simon Cockerell, the general manager of Koryo Tours as cited in Jeppesen, *See You Again in Pyongyang*.

[17] Jeppesen, 168.

[18] Jeppesen, 210.

[19] Jeppesen, 188.

"binary socialism."[20] In the most extreme renderings of socialist experience, all of the complexities of Soviet social life are reduced to the frame of acting, staging, and masks where there is no private life, no morality, and where people are forced to live a life of lies. To see the reach of such a framework, one only has to recall the common trope of Pyongyang as a Potemkin village, north Korea as an endless rerun of the Truman Show, where real life is hidden behind a political façade.

But there is more at stake than simply a corrective to the north Korea narrative. The capacity to understand statements like this has implications for other socialist and postsocialist contexts, but more importantly extends to understanding the paradoxes of political power more broadly, what Susan Buck-Morss would call the unchecked "wild zone" of absolute power that lies at the heart of democracy in both its capitalist and socialist forms.[21] With the rise of illiberal democracies across Europe and the Americas, there is an increasing urgency to render a more capacious understanding of the political beyond the totalitarianism/democracy divide.[22] As Slavoj Žižek has remarked, "the moment one accepts the notion of 'totalitarianism', one is firmly located within the liberal-democratic horizon."[23] It serves as a "kind of s*topgap*: instead of enabling us to think, forcing us to acquire a new insight into the historical reality it describes, it relieves us of the duty to think, or even actively *prevents* us from thinking."[24] In this sense, "totalitarianism" is an implicating concept, revealing the political coordinates from which it is deployed.

Hence hyper focused vision cannot make meaningful sense of statements such as "Everything is forbidden, until you are told that it is allowed," for the prohibited/allowed distinction is also a product of such binary thinking.[25]

What to do with these shifting scenes tucked behind an alley, glimpsed from a bend, fragments from a space of the *unless* and *until*? These examples may not suggest the kind of perestroika atmosphere of the late Soviet period where "whatever is not expressly prohibited is allowed,"[26] because indeed, there are rules and restrictions to heed, many of them serious

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[20] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton University Press, 2006), 4–8.
[21] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.
[22] Dzenovska, Dace and Kurtović, Larisa, eds. 2018. "Lessons for Liberalism from the 'Illiberal East'." Hot Spots series, *Fieldsights*, April 25. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/series/lessons-for-liberalism-from-the-illiberal-east. See also Claude Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, ed. John B Thompson (MIT Press, 1986).
[23] *Did Somebody Say Totalitarianism?: Five Interventions in the (Mis)Use of a Notion* (Verso, 2001), 3.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Condemnations of the DPRK based on defector testimonies, however poignant, well-intentioned, and important to consider, fundamentally operate within this language of dualisms: See for instance, Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy: Ordinary Lives in North Korea*, Reprint edition (New York: Spiegel & Grau, 2010); Stephan Haggard and Marcus Noland, *Witness to Transformation: Refugee Insights into North Korea* (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011); Sandra Fahy, *Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea* (Columbia University Press, 2015).
[26] In the process of reflecting on the intellectual history of her book, Susan Buck-Morss describes the atmosphere of *glasnost* in the expression: "Whatever is not expressly prohibited is allowed." A time of "a wonderful freshness to political life." See *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 224.

and entwined in the political apparatus in unknown ways as is the case in any state, but there are also moments when the rules blur, when they bend, when they open up to something.

BETWEEN AND WITHIN

The idea that everything is forbidden, unless it is allowed, paradoxically rests on invisibility as much as it does visibility, possibility as much as it does impossibility. The "forbidden" and the "allowed" when experienced on the ground and approached ethnographically, cannot be rendered discrete as boundaries determined and known in advance by prefigured subjects that enact and monitor the always already given.[27]

One must see the rules and all the spaces around and between and within.

One must move between the hyper focused vision of rules and prohibitions and the peripheral vision of finding oneself on new ground or no ground, finding oneself in a moment of contingency, unpredictability, and surprise, finding oneself on a bus sharing music, or in a foyer that leads to a room one can see, where one can hear and smell and sense and imagine, but not enter.[28]

Being between, being within, is not a condition of opposition. It presents a certain configuration, an intimate yet always distanced relation between the forbidden and the allowed, between focused vision and peripheral vision, that troubles the binary of rule versus unfettered freedom, which too of course is a fantasy.

I am thinking between and within because it is around the periphery of the rules that life emerges.

[27] Here I am thinking with Alexei Yurchak's understanding of the performative that focuses on the situatedness and productive nature of language, which informs his idea of "performative shift" as discussed in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 18–29. He says: "In the mask/truth models the person is first posited and then involved in the act of wearing masks of revealing truths. By contrast, most performative theories do not posit the person completely in advance, before the acts—the person is enabled performatively in the repetition of the act" (22).

[28] I am inspired by the idea of being "in the middle" in the way Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart convey it: "Most people seem to be in the middle of something they somehow ended up in." See *The Hundreds* (Duke University Press, 2019), 41. See also "Beginnings" in Kathleen Stewart, *Ordinary Affects* (Duke University Press, 2007), 128–29. "It gestures not toward the clarity of answers but toward the texture of knowing" (129).

At Mangyongdae, the birthplace of Great Leader Kim Il Sung, we were straggling behind as usual, talking about other things and not really paying attention to the guide explaining the significance of this most important site.

At other stops on the tour too, he would go off to the side and smoke cigarettes or stay on the bus. He was so relaxed about everything and so disengaged from the itinerary that it was easy to forget he was supposed to be looking after us too.

The crowd moved on from the thatched roof house that marked the humble beginnings of the Great Leader's life. Now was my chance to take a proper look inside. The ancestral portraits on the wall caught my eye, so I stepped on the stone step to get a better view. As soon as he saw me, he must have run over, as he nervously tells me to put my foot down, anxiously shaking his head to tell me this was absolutely not allowed.

I had crossed a threshold.
I put my foot on a sacred site, no, I had stepped on the sacred itself.

I apologized profusely, concerned that I may have caused irreparable damage to our already ambiguous, uncertain relationship, and fearing the worst, began imagining nightmare scenarios of all the Americans that have been detained over the years.

But as we moved on to the other sites, we resumed our easy interactions, straggling behind, joking around, and not really paying attention to the guided tours, not at the Juche tower, not at the Revolutionary Martyrs' Cemetery, not at the Worker's Party Monument, and not at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun.

PERIPHERAL VISION

Peripheral vision is not the opposite of focused vision, but an awareness of their mutual implication, and the recognition of the fullness and immensity that the peripheral affords to the hyper focused. It is also always a more and less than vision because peripheral seeing is linked to hearing, touch, taste, feel, memory, time, and a politics, because of course, experience is multi-sensory.[29]

The concept of *nunchi* (눈치) in the Korean context (both south and north) gets at this kind of modality.[30] It is a way of approaching the world, a way of being in the world and locating oneself within it. It is necessarily social in that it calls for a sensing, feeling, observing, responding, decentering. It is at once an attending to others, taking the pulse of the atmospheres and moods of a space, and appropriately positioning oneself in its energetics. It is movement in and awareness through social and political contexts. It is simultaneously a strategy, a signal of deference to others, and a sign of wisdom. It is pervasive yet elusive. In this sense, the eye, *nun*, is understood as always more than just its visual capacity, as also sensual and encompassing a way of being.

Nunchi (눈치), in its older form, *nunshi* (눈칙 or 眼勢) can be traced to the Chinese *shi* (勢).[31] According to François Jullien, the word *shi* poses a "confusion" or "ambivalence" in that it inhabits two seemingly contrasting realms and is easily given to misinterpretation. On the one hand, *shi* is "a relatively common term generally given no philosophical significance…a simple, practical term, forged initially for the purposes of strategy and politics, used largely in stereotyped expressions, and glossed almost exclusively by a handful of recurring images."[32] On the other hand, it is a profound philosophical concept that "plays a determining role in the articulation of Chinese thought," discreetly and intimately tuned into "an immanent force," an infinite "process of transformation," a "propensity that governs the overall process of nature."[33] *Shi* is an "intuition of efficacy," in the midst of an "inherent potentiality at work in

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[29] Juhani Pallasmaa citing Merleau-Ponty beautifully conveys this point: "My perception is […] not a sum of visual, tactile, and audible givens. I perceive in a total way with my whole being." See "Space, Place and Atmosphere. Emotion and Peripherical Perception in Architectural Experience," *Lebenswelt: Aesthetics and Philosophy of Experience*, July 1, 2014, 231.

[30] *Nunchi* is often translated as "eye-measure," but my understanding places less stress on the centrality of vision and disperses the various modalities of sensory experience as inextricable. In other words, it emphasizes peripheral vision as a mode or method that approaches seeing differently than hyper focused vision. For a recent example of *nunchi* as "eye-measure," see Euny Hong, *The Power of Nunchi: The Korean Secret to Happiness and Success* (New York: Penguin Books, 2019).

[31] 눈칙 or 眼勢 as documented in the 17th century, Chosun period: See 역어유해 (1690) http://waks.aks.ac.kr/rsh/dir/rview.aspx?rshID=AKS-2011-AAA-2101&dataID=07_078@AKS-2011-AAA-2101_DES and also 방언집석 (1778) http://waks.aks.ac.kr/rsh/dir/rview.aspx?rshID=AKS-2011-AAA-2101&callType=dir&dirRsh=&dataID=18_041@AKS-2011-AAA-2101_DES

[32] "Dictionaries at times render the term as "position" or "circumstances," and at other times as "power" or "potential." Translators and interpreters, except in the clearly defined domain of politics, tend to compensate for imprecision by drawing attention to its polysemy but attaching no importance to it, as if it were simply yet another of the many imprecisions in Chinese thought (insufficiently "rigorous" as it is) that must be accepted and to which we must accustom ourselves." See François Jullien, *The Propensity of Things: Toward a History of Efficacy in China*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Zone Books, 1999), 11–12.

[33] Jullien, 12–14.

configuration."[34] Its force can be glimpsed in all realms of life, from politics and art to poetry and divination, as a "dynamism" or "tension" laden in the infinite movement between "the static and the dynamic," "contrast and correlation."[35]

Shi is thus suggestive of an intuition, a "propensity" so common, so integral, and so deeply embedded in Chinese culture and its systems of thought that it appears "self-evident," and is never really taken up as a domain of analytical purchase.[36] And yet, this "common model," this "working system," challenges taken for granted categories of Western thought such as cause and effect, the opposition between appearance and truth, abstraction and reality.[37] *Shi* when brought together with *nun* (눈 眼), meaning "eye" we arrive at *nunshi* (눈치 or 眼勢), an elaboration of visuality that contests Western ocularcentrism, rendering vision an instrument of knowledge, vision as a given, observation as an obvious and neutral method in the humanities and social sciences.[38]

For me this opens up the method of anthropological "participant observation" in that seeing, when encountered from the outside, contains within it a philosophy. Seeing therefore is not simply what is available to vision, in the usual material sense of an experience within a circumscribed context, an observer observing the object of study. Seeing encompasses a situational awareness on a broader, more abstract, existential level, a situatedness in flux, in movement, in the midst of what Jullien describes as an "inherent potentiality at work" pulsing through all domains of life. It is from this ground that I traverse the in and out of focus, a seeing with and through the "tension" that is *shi*, mobilizing *nunchi,* an everyday mode of encountering the world, ever attuned to the "exact boundary between the visible and the invisible."[39] As Jullien says:

> Consider a frail skiff painted in the middle of an expanse of water. Because it is so far way, the sail sheet is not detectable; even so, "if one does not paint it at all, the representation will lack *shi*." The solution is to paint only the bottom corner and not show the precise spot at which the boatman's hand holds it, which the distance makes it impossible to see. *Shi* thus creates its effect of tension at the exact boundary between the visible and the invisible, where the explicit nature of the configuration becomes more richly charged with implicit meaning, emptiness becomes allusive, and the finite and the infinite illuminate and reinforce one another.[40]

How to represent that which is not readily available to vision, that which cannot be asked after, that which emerges at the boundary, the edges, the peripheral?

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[34] Jullien, 14–16.
[35] Jullien, 11, 78.
[36] Jullien, 16–17.
[37] Jullien, 17–18, 260, 264.
[38] David Michael Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (University of California Press, 1993); Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (University of California Press, 1993).
[39] Jullien, *The Propensity of Things*, 83–84.
[40] Jullien, 83–84.

A visit to the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun is a serious affair, as it is arguably the most sacred site in the country. It is a gesture of deference to pay one's respects there. It is also a most a curious site for visitors, as Great Leader Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader Kim Jong Il lie in the central chambers of the mausoleum, their bodies immaculately preserved.[41] It is therefore on almost every itinerary to Pyongyang.

There is a strict, formal dress code, which travelers are informed of in advance. Talking is prohibited. Cameras are prohibited. Hands in pockets are prohibited. The aesthetic experience, from the somber, nostalgic music and the lines we must form to the doubling of the Leaders, everything is carefully choreographed.

The preamble to the "Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" describes it as a "grand monument to the immortality [of the leaders] and a symbol of the dignity and eternal sanctuary of the entire Korean nation."[42]

Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader comrade Kim Jong Il will always be with us!
위대한 김일성 동지와 김정일 동지는 영원히 우리와 함께 계신다!

[41] For insight into the politics and science of socialist Leader preservation that begins with the body of Lenin, and that also extends to the bodies of the Kims, see Alexei Yurchak, "Bodies of Lenin: The Hidden Science of Communist Sovereignty," *Representations* 129, no. 1 (2015): 148.
[42] *Socialist Constitution of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2014), 3.

Because I was on the road, living out of a backpack in the week leading up to the trip, I didn't have a chance to read the orientation materials carefully, and completely overlooked the section about dress code for the mausoleum visit. That's how I ended up at the most sacred site in north Korea wearing the most inappropriate clothes: blue jeans, a denim button up under an oversized wool sweater, and suede work boots. I imagined myself as a walking symbol of Western decadence and degeneracy.

To show my remorse for such a stupid and careless mistake, I tied a black silk ribbon around my neck, to suggest a sense of occasion to my overly relaxed clothes. I knew it was inadequate, but it was the best I could do, and the guides somehow made it work and allowed me to enter with the group. It helps that it is winter, they said, the rules aren't as strict. Though I couldn't help noticing how odd and out of place I looked among the locals.

A series of slow-moving walkways connect the halls of the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. We do not walk, we remain still, hands at our sides, silent, as we are led to the central chambers of the mausoleum. We go through many long halls in this manner, slowly, deliberately, moment by moment, reflecting upon the life of the leaders, their service and dedication to the country, photographic tableaus held in large gilded frames.

He suddenly taps me on the shoulder.
He asks if I have any south Korean historical dramas with me.

I thought we weren't supposed to be talking.
I thought north Koreans were prohibited from watching such material.
I thought this might be a trap.

I wiped my hard drive clean before coming here, I told him.

He was disappointed to learn that I didn't have a single movie or K-drama with me. Why the hell would I delete my hard drive?

I was anxious. I thought we weren't supposed to be talking.

When we finally reach the mausoleum chamber, we walk through an air vestibule that blows the dust and debris from our bodies, then enter a cold, dark room with a crimson glow. There are guards with guns. The melancholy music brings forth the presence of the Great Leader before we can behold the body. The darkness and drop in temperature starkly contrast with the brightly lit halls outside the chamber. We are in a different space now, a sacred space. We line up at the foot of the body in rows of four, then bow at the signal of our guides, and repeat the same procedure at the arms as we move very slowly around the Leader, until we are eventually led out of the room. I hear women weeping.

When we reach the second chamber, we walk again through an air vestibule that blows the dust and debris from our bodies, then enter a cold, dark room with a crimson glow. There are guards with guns. The melancholy music brings forth the presence of the Dear Leader before we can behold him. The darkness and the drop in temperature starkly contrast with the brightly lit halls outside the chamber. We are again in a different space, a sacred space. We line up at the foot of the body in rows of four, then bow at the signal of our guides, and repeat the same procedure at the arms of the body as we move very slowly around the Leader, until we are eventually led out of the room. Even the most cynical of the group take this ritual very seriously.

The experience was arduous, sensory overload in the slowest possible way, enveloped in an infinite space that doubles and doubles. As we turn the corner to exit the final hall, an image of Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un meets our gaze, the final scene in a sequence of hundreds.

Big. It was just BIG, you know, big beyond dimension, someone in our group says.

The coat check at the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun is strict.
No coats, no bags, no phones, no cameras, no, no, no.
Absolutely nothing is allowed inside.

I was struck by the black velvet *chimajeogori*[43] the attendants were wearing, perfectly accented by the red Leader badge. These were newly issued badges, displaying the portraits of both Leaders (not just the first) on a red socialist banner. There was something suggestively glamourous about this interpretation of the traditional Korean dress that drew me in.

Knowing well that photographs were prohibited (we had just been debriefed on the bus), I still went ahead and asked if I could take just one photo, explaining how striking the dresses were, how I had never seen anything like it, how I really wanted to remember it.

He hesitated, but I could tell he was thinking about it. As we were emptying our pockets and handing our coats to the attendant, he gently put his hand over my camera and asked the attendant if I might be able to take a quick photograph of her. We got a stern "no," but what I saw in that moment was not the impossibility of taking the photo, but the possibility to ask, the possibility of a different response, however slim, however unlikely.

[43] *Chimajeogori* / 치마저고리 the traditional Korean dress, is called *hanbok* / 한복 in the south.

We walked around the premises of the mausoleum. Everyone was excitedly taking pictures in front of the building, exploring the gardens, high on the experience of the grand, but I could no longer handle the cold.

I asked if I could go on the bus. He said that would be fine and came with me, leaving the other guide with the rest of the group. We sat and talked about this and that, nothing in particular, then out of nowhere he reached out and touched the silk ribbon around my neck.

Cute, he said.

FIELDWORK AT THE LIMIT

Anthropologists know well that it is not possible to assume the same coordinates and ground will hold across worlds. A person must first be able to imagine another world, to sense it as a life, to be "caught" in its systems and its logics.[44]

In places radically different from the Euro-American context, such as Marilyn Strathern's Melanesia, Evans-Pritchard's Zandeland, or Maurice Leenhardt's New Caledonia, this is an obvious point.[45] The same could be said for anthropologists working in the postsocialist realm that challenge taken for granted understandings of modernity and the mechanisms of the political, as in Alexei Yurchak, Katherine Verdery, and Caroline Humphrey's work on the experience of late socialism in the Soviet Union.[46] Or Stefania Pandolfo's work on madness and the soul, Amira Mittermaier on dreams and revelation, and Tanya Luhrmann on the supernatural, each engaging an anthropology of the imagination that draws insight from non-secular experiences of social life.[47] There is also the question of different "perspectival positions" and the debates around ontology to which Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Martin Hollbraad's work has been central.[48] In the domain of more-than-human relations, Donna Haraway has broadened the horizon of animal-human or more-than-human sociality.[49] Erik Mueggler and Heonik Kwon in different ways have engaged ethnographically with the phenomenon of ghosts.[50] The common link across these important studies are questions at the heart of anthropology, the question of the person, the self, the social, the political, and the problems and rewards of cultural translation.

But when it comes to north Korea, this is rarely the starting point. North Korea is sooner deemed a place unfit for fieldwork than a place that might illuminate contemporary understandings of

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[44] See Chapter 2 of Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage* (Cambridge University Press, 1980).

[45] Marilyn Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift: Problems with Women and Problems with Society in Melanesia* (University of California Press, 1988); E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); Maurice Leenhardt, *Do Kamo: Person and Myth in the Melanesian World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

[46] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*; 유르착알렉세이, 모든 것은 영원했다, 사라지기 전까지는 : 소비에트의 마지막 세대, trans. 김수환 (문학과지성사, 2019); Алексей Юрчак, *Это было навсегда, пока не кончилось. Последнее советское поколение* (Новое литературное обозрение, 2014); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton University Press, 1996); Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies After Socialism* (Cornell University Press, 2002).

[47] Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (University of Chicago Press, 2018); Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2012).

[48] Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," *Tipití: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America* 2, no. 1 (2004): 3–22; Martin Holbraad, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, "The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions," Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology website, January 13, 2014, https://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions. See also Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen, *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

[49] Donna Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*, ed. Matthew Begelke (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003); *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

[50] Erik Mueggler, *The Age of Wild Ghosts: Memory, Violence, and Place in Southwest China* (University of California Press, 2001); Heonik Kwon, *Ghosts of War in Vietnam* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

social, cultural, and political phenomena. Sonia Ryang and Hoon Song's work stand as powerful counterpoints in their development of a critical discourse on the north Korean political, which is where I locate my own contribution, and yet assumptions about north Korea appear so self-evident that it is almost impossible to question them.

Is it a matter of the tools at hand? In other words, is this a consequence of extending the analytical tools of postcolonial theory to a socialist world ordered by different conceptions of power?[51] Or perhaps it is a matter of illegibility. Like the postsocialist spaces and subjects of Eastern Europe that Dace Dzenovska describes, where the space of "radical otherness" and "critical enunciation" accessible to the postcolonial subject remains elusive, north Korea as a space of defunct socialism seems similarly illegible within the framework of the "West and the Rest." So instead of falling neatly between the First and Third Worlds, north Korea is a location off the chart, so radically beyond the map of modernity that it is sooner aligned with "another planet" than it is within the grid of First, Second, and Third.[52] North Korea, in this sense, is a limit point for anthropological fieldwork.

If anthropologists can undertake fieldwork in oceans and in outer space, what is it about the prospect of fieldwork in north Korea that appears so impossible?[53] Isn't anthropology precisely the discipline that can reimagine its own ground? And isn't anthropology the very cultivation of a sensibility that can inform the modes, methods, and tools of research, writing, and teaching? Here I am thinking with Anand Pandian, that perhaps what underlies the anthropological endeavor are not guidelines, rules, and the practices of a self trained in the proper conventions of fieldwork, but rather a disposition, an orientation towards a "method of experience" that leans into, that "demands a spirit of openness to the unexpected, an attunement to its elusive promise as a basis for knowledge."[54]

An ethnography of north Korea cannot be an ethnography in the "traditional" sense but it can draw its lessons from a field expansively imagined, be radically empirical and take up modalities in critical response to that experience, making it exactly an anthropological project in that it challenges the meaning of each of these categories. Without this kind of acknowledgement, there will continue to be limited anthropological research undertaken in north Korea, the kind of work that takes the cosmology of another world as central to the questions, concepts, and theories that shape our understanding. There will continue to be limited funding for this work as Korean

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[51] Dace Dzenovka for instance describes the "West and the Rest" approach that overlooks the particularities of the "Second World" and that tends to conflate the Soviet state with colonial empires, treating the former socialist world as "freshly available for interpretation with existing analytical tools, such as postcolonial theory." See in particular Chapter 1 in *School of Europeanness: Tolerance and Other Lessons in Political Liberalism in Latvia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018), 26. See also Heonik Kwon, *The Other Cold War* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

[52] The idea of north Korea as "another planet" is from Morten Traavik in the film Liberation Day (2016).

[53] With regard to fieldwork in oceans and in outer space, see for instance Stefan Helmreich, "Nature/Culture/Seawater," *American Anthropologist* 113 (March 1, 2011): 132–44; Istvan Praet and Juan Francisco Salazar, "Introduction: Familiarizing the Extraterrestrial / Making Our Planet Alien," *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 2 (November 1, 2017): 309–24; Stefan Helmreich, "Foreword: A Wrinkle in Space," *Environmental Humanities* 9, no. 2 (November 1, 2017): 300–308; Debbora Battaglia, David Valentine, and Valerie Olson, "Relational Space: An Earthly Installation," *Cultural Anthropology* 30, no. 2 (May 25, 2015): 245–56.

[54] Anand Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology: Methods for Uneasy Times* (Duke University Press Books, 2019), 47. See Chapter 2 "A Method of Experience: Reading, Writing, Teaching, Fieldwork."

Studies is largely dominated by "south" Korean studies, and because north Korea also doesn't fall within the scope of Russian, East European, Eurasian studies, it remains unlocatable in the area studies schema.[55] Beyond this, funding agencies such as the Wenner Gren foundation, the Fulbright commission, and the SSRC that follow the provisions of the USA Patriot Act as well as US Government sanctions, do not fund projects to north Korea. This is an interesting reversal from the Cold War era, where "knowing the enemy" was a virtue and funding for developing language, cultural, political competency was plenty.[56] But perhaps the most important point is that there will continue to be an impasse preventing scholarly engagements with countries deemed "evil" and "crazy" on the moral imperative of human rights and state security regimes.

So when I am asked: How can you do fieldwork in north Korea? Can you even see anything? I take it to mean, how can anyone make reliable observations and conduct legitimate interviews in a place where truth is hidden and reality distant? I am facing the assumption that this is a state deemed "totalitarian" and thereby foreclosed to ethnographic methods. I am facing the problem of "binary socialism" (totalitarianism and its impossible relationship to truth). And I am facing a curious conservatism in anthropology (a definite understanding of ethnography). Here is where the predetermined impossibility of fieldwork in north Korea can be reduced to the problem of access (an anthropologist cannot conduct participant observation or interviews in a "totalitarian" country), transparency (everything that is visible is untruth because truth of course is hidden), morality (research should not be undertaken in sites considered "evil"), and the questions of personhood, self, life, politics, ontology, cosmology, and translation never even need to be broached.

My response is a method that grapples with these recurring themes of impossibility, to perforate spaces within it, to demonstrate that fieldwork in north Korea is possible, if seeing itself is reimagined. This way, we can see that even in the most sacred site in the country, one can talk and even ask about south Korean dramas when talking is prohibited, one can wear jeans inside the mausoleum when the dress code is strictly formal, and the comrade guide may turn out to be less a minder than a friend or both. The many moments that trouble the prohibited/allowed distinction, moments of a social, cultural, political universe becoming, seen and unseen, compose these vignettes at the limit of the visible. If to "translate is to situate oneself in the space of the equivocation and to dwell there," as Viveiros De Castro has said, this work might be called a dwelling.[57]

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[55] John Lie argues that "the study of Korea is dominated by methodological nationalism and an insistent emplacement in an area called East Asia" in his article "The Tangun Myth and Korean Studies in the United States," *Transnational Asia* 1, no. 1 (December 30, 2016). Though his critique is directed at a pervasive regionalism and insularity in Korean Studies, with which I agree, I also build on this point to bring attention to the fact that funding depends on locatability and legibility within these geographic boundaries.

[56] Thinking with Joshua Craze, we might trace this kind of redacted knowing to the U.S. War on Terror, where redacted government documents symbolize the kind of knowledge regime created by the single visible word: "waterboarding" or "torture," where we can read the signaling of an event, but not its context, details, the course of its emergence as an act of political power. Hence "north Korea" -- it is an entity always already known in this redacted sense. See "Grammar of Redaction" (New Museum, Temporary Center for Translation, 2014), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/535dcd87e4b08cab3cb3e421/t/53c3f795e4b011c6ecfff2bd/1405351829509/A+Grammar+of+Redaction+Joshua+Craze.pdf.

[57] Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," 10.

It was my second trip to the DMZ from the northern side.

It was stifling and unbearably humid, just like summer in Seoul, a mere 55 kilometers but a world away. Groups formed near the bathroom and around the air conditioner in the gift shop, while the smokers congregated outside and offered cigarettes to the bus drivers. Like it is anywhere, the sociality created by smokers was meaningful, but especially so because most tourists don't speak Korean.

As soon as our eyes met, I recognized him. He was the military officer who guided my first trip to the DMZ earlier that year. We were both a bit stunned. He recognized me immediately too, though it had been eight months since we last saw each other. We shook hands, he asked what I was doing there, which was a funny question to ask, we exchanged small talk, and it was all a bit awkward to be so delighted to see someone I hardly knew.

Unfortunately, he wouldn't be able to guide our group, as he was already scheduled to lead the Germans. It's been really busy, he said, August is the busiest time of year because of the Mass Games. He then excused himself to give the debriefing that takes place before entering the Joint Security Area.

As the crowd gathered around a large hand-painted map of Korea, the officer looked over at me and winked.

What was that?
Did anyone else see that?
I was surprised, confused, unsure of how to read the situation.
I nervously smiled.

He said he wouldn't be able to guide our group, but right before the checkpoint he got on our bus.

Did he make a switch with someone else?
Why did he do it?
Was he suspicious that I was here again?
But didn't he seem happy to see me?

I didn't know what to think or what to say, just smiled to acknowledge that I noticed.

He walked down the aisle and sat next to me.

In some ways, the tour from the north is less rigid than the one from the south. On the roof of the *Panmungak* building, it was okay to wander around, to take photos, talk, joke, smoke, point, and do all of the things forbidden on the other side.

As we parted, I gave the officer some south Korean cigarettes. No words, just discreetly put them in his hand. These are the latest fad among men your age in the south, I wanted to tell him. But couldn't.

THE PERIPHERAL AS METHOD

The problem with depending solely on hyper focused vision is that it's easy to become too invested in the distinction between the forbidden and allowed to notice the indistinct, the diffuse, the oblique, the ephemeral of experience that undoes that distinction.

Peripheral vision senses something in the wink of the military officer, in the way he switched his schedule to board my bus, in my desire to tell him about the world those cigarettes came from, but being unable to. It enables me to notice my surprise in each of these moments. But I can only notice these moments in relation to focused vision that sees the Korean DMZ as the scariest place on earth, where one wrong move could get you shot, and I cannot shake these assumptions about north Korea no matter how open minded I imagine myself to be. Therefore, the very assumptions that structure my expectations of the country are also what make discernable the many experiences that run counter to them, that show in relief all of the moments that puncture the script. In this sense, the focused and peripheral are mutually illuminating, restoring vision in all of its embodied, relational, conceptual, and sensory capacities.

So the wink and these other moments of surprise that emerge from the peripheral, moments that might easily be overlooked or dismissed as nothing, this is what becomes the object of my method. These are not objects that can be directly asked after, for they can only be approached negatively, by moving in and out of focus, inhabiting the *sh*i through *nunchi*, the tension that keeps me returning again and again to scenes that emerge at the boundary of the seen and unseen. As much as I would have simply liked to ask, are you sitting next to me because you want to keep an eye on me or is it that you're really glad to see me? this is not a possible question, for fear that I may put myself or him at risk, because I don't know what would happen, or that it would too violently, too transparently, put our positions or intentions into focus.

This method might also be described in terms of an "attunement," an articulation of Kathleen Stewart's work, attending to atmospheres and affects and all of the sensory sensitivities it demands.[58] It is finding oneself in a "pocket"— "an event that does not yet have its form, a moment of unforeclosed experience."[59] Following the logic of *shi* may also evoke Ingold's notion of "correspondence," a mode of participant observation that responds to and remains open to what unfolds in the field.[60] This way of working is not centered on duration, the thickness of the data gathered, or its reliability. In this sense, as Ingold is very keen to point out, "participant observation is absolutely *not* an undercover technique for gathering intelligence on people, on the pretext of learning from them," for it is sooner a way of being in the world than it is a transposable method.[61] Further, the idea of a situatedness in flux may bring to mind Harawayan

[58] Kathleen Stewart, "Atmospheric Attunements," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3 (June 1, 2011): 445–53; Ben Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres," *Emotion, Space and Society* 2, no. 2 (December 1, 2009): 77–81.
[59] Kathleen Stewart in dialogue with Lauren Berlant in "Atmospheric Attunements," 446–47.
[60] "That's Enough about Ethnography!," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (June 17, 2014): 389.
[61] Ingold, 388.

situatedness, "a politics of positioning" that mobilizes an optics of multidimensionality, partiality, and embodiment in the midst of an unfurling.[62]

Bringing in the specificities of socialist experience to such experimental trajectories, I take them up in a context where limits and restrictions are very much connected to the realm of the state, the ideological, and political, and where there are potentially serious consequences for the researcher, the interlocutors, and even family members, if boundaries are transgressed. Peripheral vision as method then, demands a certain deference to form, foreclosure, and the representational as well as the slow sensitivity to the emergent, the possible, and the non-representational.[63] Peripheral vision is the capacity to make visible the tension between form and unform.

In the way I envision the peripheral as method, it is the sensible of the unexpected emergent, where the "impacts on your body are seeds for a worlding," as Lauren Berlant and Kathleen Stewart's *Hundreds* project seeks to amplify.[64] The moment of surprise in the unexpected wink is such a moment, one of impacts, intensities, and composition.[65] It is a movement between form and its unfurling, not in the sense of resistance, as in opposition to the rules or the state, but in the sense that Alexei Yurchak's framework of "performative shift" contends, whereby the "authoritative discourse" of Soviet socialism, its standardization in ritual and form that was established by the state enabled an internal shift, "a profound internal reinterpretation and displacement" of the very system that created it.[66] This shift developed gradually over several decades, beginning with Stalin's death in 1953 that left vacant his role as the sole interpreter of "Leninism," the foundational, unquestionable doctrine of Soviet socialism.[67]

The shift was composed of "minute internal displacements and mutations," acts that "may appear inconsequential to most participants and remain invisible to most observers."[68] Most importantly, "[t]hey do not have to contradict the political and ethical parameters of the system and…may even allow one to preserve the possibilities, promises, positive ideals, and ethical values of the system while avoiding the negative and oppressive constraints within which these are articulated."[69] In other words, it was the inherent paradox within the system that enabled these complex, contradictory relationships to the state, and the performative reproduction of state discourse that inadvertently led to the proliferation of whole new collective worlds of being,

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[62] "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 586.
[63] Some influential volumes in non-representational theory include Nigel Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (Routledge, 2008); Phillip Vannini, ed., *Non-Representational Methodologies : Re-Envisioning Research* (Routledge, 2015).
[64] As drawn from the concept of "The New Ordinary" in *The Hundreds*, 17.
[65] I'm thinking with the notion that "everyone knows a composition when they see one." See "Swells" in *The Hundreds*, Berlant and Stewart, 4; Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto,'" *New Literary History* 41, no. 3 (2010): 471–90. I thank Katie Stewart for introducing me to this text, to this way of writing world.
[66] *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 14.
[67] See the section "Lefort's Paradox" in Yurchak, 10–14. and also Yurchak's more recent interpretation of "Leninism" in relation to Lefort's concept of power as an "empty space" in "Bodies of Lenin." For a direct reading of Claude Lefort, see Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, in particular Ch 8 "The Logic of Totalitariansim" and Ch 9 "The Image of the Body and Totalitarianism."
[68] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 28.
[69] Yurchak, 28.

intimate spaces of shared interests and forms of life, a sociality that existed both inside and outside the political system. [70]

With this analytical framework in mind, I refer to certain instances in north Korea, made visible by way of the peripheral, that suggest similar spaces of interaction, belonging, and intimacy: Expressing interest in a Soviet rock band, when listening to foreign, especially politically subversive music, is prohibited. Preferring to get a drink over going to the Juche Tower, when the Juche Tower is the symbolic heart of north Korean political ideology, one of the most important monuments in Pyongyang. A military officer accepting south Korean cigarettes from a Korean American at the DMZ, when these are politicized figures, potentially hostile entities in the north. Openings that bring something into view.[71]

In my conversations with an American who has worked alongside north Korean partners for over 10 years, his take on the notion that "everything is forbidden, unless it is allowed" is that it misses a crucial point. Sure, there are a lot of rules about what not to do, but the rules are usually "really really really vague," something like "don't do anything anti-socialist," which a person then must discern and make sense of in the context of their own lives. So it's more about an "everything is unclear and likely problematic," he says.[72]

There is risk, there is threat, and a suggestion that the rules and prohibitions are not as clear as they seem. One encounters this ambiguity and the lurk of danger in fieldwork. It was in this sense that I was unable to ask questions, especially direct questions about certain things I noticed because of an overwhelming feeling of unknowing. It was impossible to discern whether my inquiry would be read as political, under what circumstances, why, and by whom, and whether I would be putting myself or my interlocutors at risk. I tended to avoid asking anything that might be construed as political, and when at times I inadvertently transgressed the uncertain line, I knew it atmospherically, through *nunchi*, in an intimate attunement to presence and proximal ways of seeing and knowing that exceed the primacy of focused vision.[73] The space of the

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[70] Being *vnye* or living *vnye* is a Russian concept that Yurchak describes as "being simultaneously inside and outside of some context." Through this idea of *vnye*, he demonstrates the condition of being both inside and outside the political system, and I take inspiration from this in thinking the peripheral with the focused. See in particular his chapter on the emergence of deterritorialized milieus during late Socialism, Ch 4 in *128.*

[71] The ambiguity, the overlap, the between and within is the opening. And here, seeking a "resolution" may be too risky because of the possibility of being misread or all together becoming illegible like the figure of Manmouhan that Lawrence Cohen gives us. As in his work that opens to "alternative homosocialities" and traces other "desiring possibilities" in the context of the dominant "sexual system" ordered on the axes of playfulness/friendship and violence/manliness," I too found myself in a place that at once collapsed these distinctions and yet distinctly reiterated them. See "Holi in Banaras and the Mahaland of Modernity," *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1995): 418, 421.

[72] From a personal communication, September 2019.

[73] According to Kevin Hetherington, proximal knowledge is "performative rather than representational. Its nonrepresentational quality is also context-specific, fragmentary, and often mundane" as opposed to distal ways of knowing "in which the 'thing' being known is assumed to be in a stable and finished state and thereby amenable to representation. An object is constituted as a totality and a subject is able to focus on it independently." See "Spatial Textures: Place, Touch, and Praesentia," *Environment and Planning A* 35, no. 11 (November 1, 2003): 1934–35.

political, the separation between politics and "everyday life," of what is allowed and prohibited, turns out, is not as distinctly demarcated as usually imagined for a "totalitarian" society.[74]

Considering the particularities of this field site, an anthropologist in north Korea is in a very underprivileged position in some ways. Anthropological fieldwork, after all, depends on the ability to ask questions, to conduct interviews as well as long-term participant observation. But these same constraints are also what forced me to rethink the observational mode, the inability to ask questions amplified the intensity of my observations. By recalibrating to the peripheral as my starting point, to focus not only on everything that was clear, but also everything that manifested in the unclear, ambiguous, blur of the rules, I was able to see glimpses of the spaces around the rules, and observe ways in which the rules also enabled exploration, self-creation, the pursuit of interests, influenced fashion, and imparted a certain openness.

There was an intensity to the peripheral as method, the tremendous intensity of noticing so much all the time, of being surprised all the time. It might be compared to the intensity of focus required to write or to teach, or the kind of full body sensitivity required of a photographer always in the thick of a process of unfolding.

To be a photographer is demanding work, and as Henri Cartier-Bresson has put it, "it is a profession that develops a great anxiety… because you're always waiting for what's going to happen, what what what what…what yes, what um, yes"…it is a way of being in the world where "you have to forget yourself, you have to be yourself and you have to forget yourself… when you are photographing, you're not trying to push a point or explain something or prove something. You don't prove anything, it comes by itself"… it is a way of always being open and ready for "the shock, the surprise" that "jumps at you"… It is a presence, a moment, an enjoyment of the yes, an affirmation.[75]

The fieldwork I undertook in north Korea was distinguished by this kind of an intensity, a rush that hits you in the gut, a sometimes exhilarating, sometimes nauseating headiness, whereas the fieldwork I undertook in other places, there was more time, more a sense of the everyday mundane to attend to, cooking, cleaning, paying rent, administrative tasks, and where the terrain wasn't as immensely ambiguous so this kind of focused intensity only had to be called upon on occasion.

By focusing on peripheral vision, I was able to see a certain humanity of the everyday, personal relations, values, styles, interests, albeit blurry and at the edge of coherence. They are rendered here as scenes of openings, disruptions, eruptions, scenes that puncture the notion of official scripts and state curated itineraries, rendering a north Korea beyond the hyper fixed gaze of focused vision that sees much too clearly, much too closely, much too distinctly, reading limits only as impossibilities and impingements on freedom.

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[74] On the impossibility of separating social and political life in north Korea, see Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Harvard University Press, 2012); "Biopolitics of the Logic of Sovereign Love--Love's Whereabouts in North Korea," in *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* (Lexington Books, 2009), 57–83.
[75] Henri Cartier-Bresson on "the decisive moment," see Cornell Capa, *The Decisive Moment*, Documentary Short (Foundation Henri Cartier-Bresson, International Center of Photography, 1973); Cartier Bresson, *Henri Cartier-Bresson: The Decisive Moment* (Steidl, 2014).

The peripheral as method does not disregard focused vision, but rather asks what might be known by thinking the two together, as mutually illuminating, shifting in and out of focus. It follows Trinh Minh-ha's notion of "speaking nearby," an orientation not just in research, but also in life. It is a mode of engagement that "can come very close to a subject without… seizing or claiming it," that can take on the challenge of yielding a knowing through indirectness and obliqueness, but that is also about a direct form of addressing indirectness.[76]

This approach implies a different cosmology of seeing, one that follows the logic of the black and white photographic darkroom, where red light becomes the passage, the medium, the portal through which north Korea becomes a possible world. Under the faint illumination of the red safelight, latent images can come to life because photo paper is blind to that color spectrum, whereas direct contact with sunlight or incandescent light would destroy the image. The ethics or pedagogy is in the "distance," an ever intimate distance that renders scenes monochrome, that reveals a north Korea *so far*, signaling the incommensurable gap, the knowledge gained from that recognition, and the open field of more things to come.

The peripheral as method is about these scenes unfolding in the margins, negotiating feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, exhilaration, fear, and the unknown, lingering in half formed responses to ambiguous questions, handwritten notes passed through the hands of others, and drunken exchanges in late night Pyongyang, in and out of focus.

[76] "'Speaking Nearby:' A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh–Ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (1992): 82–91.

I saw her as I came up the steps of the Children’s Palace.

We briefly met eyes.

Strikingly beautiful in her delicate white knit skirt suit, the red of the Leader badge perfectly adorning her as she stood in the cool gray marble of the landing.

Students with digital cameras were trying to sneak photos of us, couples walked holding hands, families stood in line for the rides, but what really caught my eye were the young men wearing socialist khakis in fashionable and creative ways. One had a black wallet with a chunky silver chain that clipped to his belt loop, like something out of a punk scene. Another had his top coolly unbuttoned revealing a crisp white undershirt, so communist chic.

This was Friday night at the Kaeson Youth fun fair.

I saw him as I was leaving the departures gate.

We briefly met eyes.

He was striking in his black short sleeved vinalon suit, the deep V of his neckline, the red of the Leader badge, a perfect complement to his look.[77]

[77] Vinalon is a synthetic fiber invented by Ri Sung Gi. For the history and labor theory of vinalon, see Cheehyung Harrison Kim, "North Korea's Vinalon City: Industrialism as Socialist Everyday Life," *Positions: Asia Critique* 22, no. 4 (November 1, 2014): 809–36.

She told me she liked my clothes.
She asked me to teach her how to look cool when smoking cigarettes.
She wanted to learn more American slang.

One of his clients had given him a keychain in the shape of Australia that he treasured.

It was his dream to go there one day.

We both recognized the limit and possibility that this keychain represented, both his recognition that he practically cannot go and my recognition of his recognition.

While sitting on the steps of the Kaesong Koryo Museum, he asked if I thought we would ever be able to hang out like this in Seoul.

How does one understand a question like this?
How does one answer a question like this?
It brings into focus all of the impossibility around our relation.

Someone from the north sitting together with someone from the south, on a granite step smoking cigarettes.

Maybe, was all I could say.

POLAROID CAMERA

The day before my departure from Seoul to Beijing, from where I would go on to Pyongyang for the first time, I was given a polaroid camera.[78] Unlike the camera I brought with me, a super portable, super discreet 35mm film camera, the polaroid was almost its functional opposite. Big, flashy, plastic, and loud, the thing was awkward in my hands. I didn't know how to go about using it at first, but it didn't take long to realize there was something a polaroid camera could do that no other camera could.[79]

There is this pervasive assumption about vision, that it works neutrally like an apparatus, the way a voice recorder or camera documents its surroundings. Following this notion to its logical conclusion would suggest that the more clear, focused, and magnified the seeing, the closer we would get to the real, the true, the objective. From Western tour guides and tourists to professional photographers, many before me have utilized the polaroid and the unique image-object it produces as a lighthearted, easy way to forge contact.[80] The photographer Eric Lafforgue, for instance, has said:

> At first, the idea of making polaroids was just a kind of artistic work, to keep the dull colors of this country, but quickly I discovered this camera was the best way to interact with locals and immediately break the ice. Everytime I took a Polaroid, I made another one as a gift for my North Korean "model." So many times, this allowed me to see North Koreans in a very different way, and to start some conversations, through my guide, of course.[81]

I am certainly not the first to comment on the use of polaroids in north Korea. From tourists to professional photographers (Eric Lafforgue) and journalists (Wong Maye-E of AP News), many before me have utilized polaroids and its unique image-object making capacity to forge relations in uncertain, challenging situations. My approach differs in that I was not seeking to capture the real human face beneath the totalitarian mask, I wasn't trying to see the hidden.

I soon became enamored with the polaroid camera and got another one, a vintage model from the 1950s, which was even more of a spectacle. With its bellows, creaks, and boisterous mechanisms, its smell of aging leather and grease, its clunky film packs and unreliable battery, the extravagant way in which the exposed film had to be swiftly pulled from the apparatus, the time needed to wait for the chemistry to do its magic, and then the process of drying the images—there was no way to ignore the fact that I was taking a photograph.

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[78] "Polaroid" here is used as shorthand for the broad category of instant film cameras. The particular model I was given was a Fujifilm Instax 210, and since then I have also used the Polaroid Land camera, which is the analog predecessor to the instant film camera we recognize today.

[79] See Yurchak on the notion of acting "as if" in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 16–18.

[80] Cigarettes, alcohol, flirting are also used in similar ways.

[81] His reflections on taking polaroids in north Korea can be found on his website: http://www.ericlafforgue.com/storage/files/pages/polaroids-in-north-korea.pdf < accessed October 29, 2019 > See also this short article on the AP Image blog: https://apimagesblog.com/blog/2017/6/16/north-korea-portraits-ordinary-lives-ever-in-leaders-shadow < accessed November 4, 2019>

It held an immense yet curious presence, something so visible that it became almost invisible, No one was concerned that I might be taking undercover photos or documenting something forbidden, because with no zoom lens, no memory, it is impossible with a polaroid. At the border checkpoint when crossing by land from China to the Rajin-Sonbong area, the officials were dumbfounded when I handed in my camera and film for inspection. I asked them to handle it with care as it was old and fragile, I offered to open up the device to show them how it works, and they waved me along, not even bothering to look, as they were too preoccupied with the digital cameras and laptops.

In this space between visibility and invisibility, there emerged room, ample space and time for allowing the polaroid to do exactly what it was meant to do: "See What Develops."[82] Sure, the camera is a great ice breaker and who isn't enamored by a polaroid, but what emerged in the periphery of the image was even more fascinating. It brought into view shared moments of anticipation, vulnerability, laughter, desire, friendship, something suspended beyond the mere production of an image. The materiality of the photograph was important too, as it was an object that could be held, circulated, referenced, exchanged, given as gifts, requested as favors, used to deliver messages. And with that materiality, a world of relations came into being, a world not contained and made real by the photograph as evidence, the photograph as supplement, but a world made possible and emergent in the open-ended moment of its making, between the pressing of the camera shutter and the manifestation of an image.[83]

In the foreword to Teju Cole's *Blind Spot*, Siri Hustvedt discusses the ways in which the camera eye is not a human eye: "The camera takes in everything inside its frame. We do not. Human beings have poor peripheral vision. Details vanish because we cannot focus on everything at once. Sequences blur. We pay attention to what is most salient for us."[84]

The kino-eye of the revolutionary Dziga Vertov, the camera eye that sees "life unawares," can see revolution and envision a new world in the everyday, moments that even life itself is not aware of yet.[85] I see an affinity with the peripheral as method in how the camera eye can capture scenes unseen beyond the bounds of practical vision. This is what makes the kino-eye so revolutionary, its mobilization to make the unseen seen. Vertov's lesson to us is that the camera enables us to see otherwise. We cannot focus on everything at once, but we can refocus, shift focus, and unfocus, to inhabit spaces that are generally not given to habituated forms of seeing.

Some things don't lend themselves to be photographed. My camera had to remind me of that.

[82] "See What Develops" is a Polaroid tagline from the 1990s.
[83] "Supplement" as elucidated by Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).
[84] Teju Cole, *Blind Spot* (Random House, 2017).
[85] Dziga Vertov, *Man with a Movie Camera*, 1929.

At every site, she would ask if I had been here before. This was my fifth trip to north Korea, so I had already been to many of the usual stops on the city tour. But the Youth Palace in central Pyongyang, no, I had not been. She was really excited to show me something new.

As our group was being led into the auditorium for a performance, she took me aside and nervously led me up the stairs, explaining that she would give me a quick private tour.

I was struck by the light from a windowsill. I wanted to take her portrait there in that light to thank her for the adventure, but she was a bit tense, though trying not to show it, and the battery on my old polaroid camera was finicky, and after two failed exposures that turned out completely black (the lens never opened), she insisted we return downstairs to join the group.

Somewhere within the dark depths of the Chilbo Mountains, I was with two other Americans, the bus driver, a Korean guide, and the hotel receptionists. The sun had set by the time we arrived. It was eerie, the hotel seemed as if it had been vacant for a while, and with no Western guide to mediate the interactions, we were all a bit uneasy. This was the "other arrangement" since Americans are prohibited from staying in the homestay village.

After dinner, as we talked over some beer, I took out my polaroid as a diversion from all of the questions about Juche and politics that the other Americans kept relentlessly pressing.

He wanted a very specific photo of himself. He was dressed in a dark track suit, wearing brand new sneakers, and I was surprised not to see his Leader badge. He moved a chair to an empty part of the dining area. He leaned back, stretched out his legs and crossed his arms in what looked like a gangsta rap pose, though whatever the reference was, it was something cool. The lighting was dim, so the image came out too dark, but he still liked it.

We went on several hikes a day while staying in the Chilbo area. Both the guide and the bus driver knew a lot about these mountains. They oriented us to the vegetation, and showed us which were edible (the kinds good for *namul*), they told us legends about rock formations that were indistinguishable to the untrained eye, and shared with us poetry about the beautiful peaks of Mount Chilbo.

They would look for a branch with just the right weight, curvature, and size, everything exactly so, then remove the outer layers of its bark, smoothen it down to its core until it became a walking stick that fit perfectly in their hands.

I was impressed and told the driver how much I admired his.

He stayed behind on one of the hikes to make one for me.
It was gleaming white, crafted even more carefully than his own.

He had the most striking penmanship, a kind of aesthetic and a style of stroke that I had never seen before.

He was also very particular about the pen he used. I knew because when I asked him some more questions about premodern Korean poetry, he offered to write some of them down in my notebook, and insisted on using his own pen.

He wrote me a note too, though afterwards seemed unsure about what he had just done. Would anyone be checking notebooks at the border, he wanted to know, and was relieved to hear that they wouldn’t.

FLESH

"To see an object is either to have it on the fringe of the visual field and be able to concentrate on it, or else respond to this summons by actually concentrating upon it," Maurice Merleau-Ponty has said.[86] And even without knowing much about how the eye works, we know that in order to see an object, there is an uncanniness to heed to, the to and fro between peripheral and focused vision, the blind spots of vision that we are not attuned to or take for granted in living the everyday. This is to say that "an object cannot become an object without the surrounding objects' becoming a horizon, and so vision is an act with two facets."[87] The lesson here is that of the horizon, of negativity, or what Merleau-Ponty would call the "flesh" of the world. The scene and the planes and the intersection of a moment within a fleshy viability.

Inhabiting the flesh "requires a focusing, however brief" on the "less precise" a "more general redness" before "*fixing* it."[88] This mode of focusing is "bound up with a certain wooly, metallic, or porous [?] configuration or texture"[89] that never sees red as red, but sees one variation of red within a field of not yet visible possible reds. It is but a "punctuation in the field of red things."[90] If we could apprehend the "*flesh* of things,"

> …we would recognize that a naked color, and in general a visible, is not a chunk of absolutely hard indivisible being offered all naked to a vision which could be only total or null, but is rather a sort of straits between exterior horizons and interior horizons ever gaping open, something that comes to touch lightly and makes diverse regions of the colored or visible world resound at the distances, a certain differentiation, an ephemeral modulation of this world—less a color or a thing, therefore, than a difference between things and colors, a momentary crystallization of colored being or of visibility.[91]

Peripheral vision is this momentary coming to be, a feeling out, a space of suspending judgement because you're not sure what is what and who is who yet, what this "difference between things" is made of yet. It is super ephemeral and intense, discreet and stark, and like ambient music, composed of layers that one can attune to or ignore, flow in and out of, in and out of focus.[92]

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[86] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (Routledge, 1962), 67.
[87] Merleau-Ponty, 68.
[88] *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Northwestern University Press, 1968), 131.
[89] Merleau-Ponty, 132.
[90] Merleau-Ponty, 132.
[91] Merleau-Ponty, 132.
[92] See liner notes for Brian Eno's 1985 album *Thursday Afternoon* and also his 1975 album *Discreet Music*.

At the Foreign Language Bookstore in central Pyongyang, Scott, a fellow traveler, handed me a book. It was an English translation of a poem about Mt. Paekdu by the Soviet Korean poet Cho Gi Chon. We stood in a corner, carefully holding the book, admiring the aesthetic of eighties socialism, the font, the colors, the form. It was a moment of nostalgia for a world that seemed so distant, yet was right in front of us.

When I got to the counter to pay, our guide and the clerk both pointed to Mt. Paekdu at the top of my stack. They looked at me, then at each other, their eyes meeting for just an instant before they began reciting the poem.[93]

Their eyes lit up.
They were channeling revolutionary fervor.
I was in awe.
As if I had come upon something.

[93] Mt. Paekdu is where Kim Il Sung fought the war of resistance against Japanese colonialists, and it is also the birthplace of Kim Jong Il. It is a sacred mountain. See Cho Gi Chon, *Mt. Paekdu: An Epic Poem* (Pyongyang, Korea: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1990).

Many months later, I visited the Foreign Language Bookstore again. The clerk remembered me when I brought up the poem. I explained that I wanted more copies of Mt. Paekdu for some friends back home, and she helped me find both the Korean and English versions. When I kept asking about Korean language books, she just let me go behind the counter so that I could look for myself while she helped other people.

When he saw me there, he laughed, puzzled as to what I was doing in the clerk's area.

He asked me what book I recommended.
He was interested in romance novels.
I laughed at the strange turn of events.
I handed him a graphic novel about evil American imperialists.
He had already read that one.
I gave him a cookbook.
Boring.
Then a collection of poetry.
Deadpan, silence.

When we had enough of this back and forth, I told him about the last time I was at the bookstore, how the clerk and my guide at the time so magnificently recited Mt. Paekdu.

Of course, they knew each other, they work for the same travel company.

I asked if it would be possible to see him.
He took out his phone and began to dial.
But I never got an answer.

Vladi, he told us to call him. He was a Russian living in Germany who had come to the DPRK out of sheer curiosity. So much is just like the Soviet Union, he said to me throughout our five days together. We became instant friends because we had Russian as a secret language and could go off and talk about things we thought no one else could understand.

On an overnight trip to Kaesong, we lodged at the Folk Custom Hotel, a compound comprised of traditional Korean dwellings. Our group of 61 tourists and dozen or so guides and interns were the only ones staying there that night. Something about being outside of Pyongyang and the novelty of staying in this kitschy place out of time, must have stirred a sense of excitement in the group. But there was only one bar, and it was already overcrowded and hot, filled with people Vladi and I didn't know.

Then he asked me a question that would change the course of the evening.

I brought a bottle of really good Russian vodka and some German sausages. It's in my suitcase.
Should I go get it to share with our guides?

Here began our private party.
A small group of tourists, a few of the Korean guides, and a couple of Western guides.

Two liters of vodka later, Vladi asked me another question.

You know, I also have a bottle of gin in my suitcase.
Do you think I should go get it?

It was already past two in the morning. And as much as I wanted to keep hanging out, I knew I had to leave to save myself. Our guide, however, wouldn't hear of it, he demanded that I stay.

You must drink. You must not betray.

The next morning, it was easy to see who had stayed until the end. Vladi barely managed to get on the bus, and our guide, who was always cheerful and relaxed, was sullen and roughed up.

That's how I became the "traitor."

I wondered if he was trying to tell me something. That maybe it's not just that I betrayed them by leaving early, that there was also a bigger, more existential betrayal too.

We arrived at a hotel in Chongjin for lunch. The mood was heavy. Maybe because we all knew that Chongjin was one of the cities that had suffered most during the famine of the 1990s.[94]

As we were getting settled around the table, he asked me to find out if anyone was interested in draft beer. Seeing the bottles of beer already set on the table, no one showed any interest. It was also noon, way too early to start drinking again. But he was so excited about this beer and wanted to confirm, were we really sure that we didn't want to try it? To his disappointment, we all shook our heads no. It was only a bit later that we learned of the microbrewery housed on the premises. Then it became clear, his delight and insistence. Once we knew, we were all of course eager to try it. German style, we determined.

After lunch, the group wandered around the courtyard, taking photos and waving hello to the school children passing by. I found myself alone with him, me taking in the sun, him taking drags of his cigarette. Whenever it was just the two of us, he would speak Korean.

Knowing his excitement for the beer at lunch, and also quite curious about the way microbreweries were an emerging phenomenon, I asked him if it would be possible to see the brewery. He wasn't sure, but signaled for me to follow, and led me to an adjacent building where the tanks were located. I was to wait outside while he checked with the staff to see if it was okay.

Inside the building were several gleaming copper tanks housed in a pristinely tiled facility. And there was another restaurant there, bustling with activity, for locals only.

[94] For some context on the "famine," which is called the "March of Suffering" in the north, see my review of Sandra Fahy's book: "Marching Through Suffering: Loss and Survival in North Korea by Sandra Fahy (Review)," *Anthropological Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (November 20, 2016): 987–92. And for reference also her book *Marching Through Suffering*.

Our Western guide had the foresight to buy a Miyari on one of his earlier trips to Pyongyang. Miyari, meaning “echo” in Korean, is a portable Karaoke machine made in north Korea. It consists of a microphone that contains a thousand songs and one cord that connects it to a TV. It’s a party in a carrying case, especially if you find yourself with three middle aged Korean men in a hotel deep in the mountains with not much else to do. We just finished dinner and passed around the polaroids I had taken that day. At their request, I took a few more of the guides, then me with the guides. But the fun of taking photos of each other could only last so long.

This is when he brought out the Miyari.
It could be hours until the night came to an end.

I learned more songs in that time than I had in years.

The French guy, who spoke hardly any Korean had memorized some songs, impressing everyone.

We danced.

I noticed our comrade falling in love with one of the women in the group.

Everywhere in Rason people would greet us in Russian instead of English. I had no idea the Russian presence was so strong here. But of course, Rajin-Sonbong is a Special Economic Zone bordering Russia and China.

This part of north Korea was strikingly different from Pyongyang. There was a Bank of China, a newly opened Russian restaurant called "New World," solar panels on street lamps.

Then I found myself in the lobby of an unmarked back-alley massage parlor.

This was not part of the regular itinerary, but an optional side excursion that was highly recommended by our Western guide. I wasn't interested in a massage, but was curious about the place, so I tagged along. An hour went by, waiting in the dark dank lobby with the guide and driver, then almost another, when a very tall man walked in and filled the room with his presence. I could tell he was Russian and decided to approach him, to see what I might learn about his circumstances, to find out what brought him to Rason. When one meets another foreigner in north Korea, there is always this immediate curiosity, and a bond that comes from being outsiders together. To a foreigner, I could ask all kinds of questions and it wouldn't immediately implicate me.

He was overseeing the construction of the new port, along with two of his colleagues. They were from Vladivostok. He likewise asked what I was doing there, and by the way, was I allowed to freely move around the city? They apparently could.

I noticed their Leader badges.

The next evening, we crossed paths with the Russian crew again at a restaurant. There were only a limited number of places one could go for food and entertainment in Rason, so maybe we were bound to run into each other again. This time, they invited a few of us on a tour of the city, they would take us in their SUVs, and we were enticed, but would this even be possible? Permission or not, they wanted to try, as they found it ridiculous that we were on a supervised tour. With his very powerful presence, he approached our guide who suddenly seemed so small and powerless. We chimed in from the side to explain that it would only be for a short while, maybe one hour.

Then the unexpected happened. Our guide actually seemed to consider the proposal. He didn't immediately say no, he wasn't upset or flustered by the situation, he was perhaps even intrigued, and there was pause, and there was pause, and there was pause.

THE DEVICE OF A SELF

In north Korea, my notion of a self—the self through which participant observation and other ethnographic methods are utilized, the self though which a field becomes visible—came undone. I lost myself, lost the clarity of central vision and was only able to rely on the indistinct expanse of the peripheral, as if I had lost my orientation to the world as I knew it. This was a devastating loss of ground, something akin to James Baldwin's experience in France, where his North American black and white frame of reference ruptures.[95] It was the collapse of a world constructed through the idea of south and north, and I was left reeling.

What perhaps is most central in differentiating anthropology from other disciplines is the way in which the ethnographic material, the ground of the theoretical and methodological intervention, is produced through "the device of a self."[96] This self is the locus through which the field experience, speculation, affect, memory, dreams, nostalgia, loss, history, politics, and its many layers, come together and emerge as writing, concepts, categories, theory, image, as phenomenal forms of knowing always emergent and imperfect, "imminent and never realized in fact."[97] This is the self as "medium" or the self as a "vector of transmission" that must "take in and pass onward the force of a transformative encounter."[98] This is the anthropological self in a field where radically other forms of life and understandings of the world come to be confronted. It is therefore a self at risk.

But there is a fundamental tension with another self, a self that is stable, coherent, retrievable, locatable, a self that knows, or perhaps understands too much, sees too clearly. The cultivation of this self is of course inextricable from the disciplinary legacy of anthropology. Attached to it is an implication that the best path to ethnographic knowledge is long-term fieldwork, an extended duration of time that enables the construction of a detailed account, a comprehensive context, a background from which to analyze social and cultural phenomena.[99] Long-term fieldwork is then coupled with Geertzian "thick description."[100] Fieldnotes and the camera are used to document "reality" in dense panoramic fashion, the more elaborate the better, the more context the better, the photograph as evidence, the photographic record as contact through its indexical relation to truth, the camera as endowed with a more "accurate perception" than human perception.[101] Even with the continuing debates on the problematics of representation, the question of reflexivity, and

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[95] I thank Lawrence Cohen who taught this text for an Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology course at Berkeley. His framing of *A Rap on Race* (J.B. Lippincott Company, 1971), 9–10.
[96] Kathleen Stewart, "An Autoethnography of What Happens," in *Handbook of Autoethnography* (Routledge, 2016), 659.
[97] Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147.
[98] Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology*, 72.
[99] There is no doubt that Bronislaw Malinowski's method still holds much import. See "Introduction: The Subject, Method and Scope of This Inquiry," in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (George Routledge & Sons, LTD., 1922), 1–25, http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/55822.
[100] "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973), 3–30.
[101] Lisa Sang-Mi Min, "Freeze Dried Memory Crumbs: Fieldnotes from North Korea," in *Writing Anthropology: Essays on Craft and Commitment*, ed. Carole McGranahan (Duke University Press, 2020); John Collier and Malcolm Collier, "The Challenge of Observation and the Nature of Photography," in *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (UNM Press, 1986), 7.

the experimental paths opened up in the 1980s, I would argue that there still ultimately stands a self at the center of the Euro-American tradition of social and cultural anthropology.

Participant observation, one of the most important tools of an anthropologist, has been described as a practice that involves "the self" encountering "the field," a self engaging others in a "culturally grounded way of both being in and seeing the world," a self that is aware of the "ontological and epistemological" stakes of this endeavor.[102] This has been called an "ethnographic sensibility."[103] A "practice of correspondence."[104] Or recalling again the *Writing Culture* moment that explored the politics of writing and reading, participant observation, if reimagined beyond "the protocols of normal science," might be a way to get at a discursive, evocative, and performative cultural poetics.[105] These are compelling prescriptions, but what perhaps remains underemphasized is the disciplinary convention that still relies on a certain conception of the self, on which sensibilities and practices are to be cultivated, and through which distinctions such as "anthropologist" and "native/informant/interlocutor/local" are reiterated.

Terms such as "native" anthropologist and "visual" anthropologist also suggest such an investment, a self that is grounded within one's own culture or within an exclusively visual domain.[106] Alexei Yurchak, for instance, following the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, points to the "multiple temporal, spatial, and cultural decenterings of his authorial self" that cannot be contained by the label "native" anthropologist, underscoring the risk of confusing reflexivity with the construction of a unitary authorial "I."[107] Trinh T. Minh-ha has argued a similar point in her incisive critique of anthropology, that the term "native" serves only to differentiate while reinforcing scholarly pretentions toward universality.[108] Lucien Taylor has responded to the tendency to single out the "visual" in anthropology, that turns it into a sub-discipline, that places it within a hierarchy of knowledge, that puts forth a subject centered mode of visual knowing.[109] His edited volume *Visualizing Theory* (1994) offers an alternative to "the scopophobia of the logocratic anthropological academy," embracing the "plurality of modes of experience and cognition by which we may both visualize theory and theorize visuality."[110]

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[102] Carole McGranahan, "Ethnography Beyond Method: The Importance of an Ethnographic Sensibility," *Sites* 15, no. 1 (June 19, 2018): 2, https://sites.otago.ac.nz/Sites/article/view/373.
[103] McGranahan, "Ethnography Beyond Method."
[104] Ingold, "That's Enough about Ethnography!," 389.
[105] Ingold, 387. See also James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986), 12.
[106] As Marilyn Strathern has said, "Liberal, Radical, Marxist, Socialist feminists talk in relation to one another. One position evokes others. Yet the manner in which these multiple positions are constantly recalled has a further effect. They do not come together as parts of a wholebut are held as coeval presences within discussion. Each bears its own proximity to experience. The optical illusion of holding among ourselves many perspectives all at once simultaneously achieves a sense of no perspective." See *The Gender of the Gift*, 23.
[107] *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 33.
[108] Minh-ha Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Georgetown University Press, 1989), 83.
[109] *Visualizing Theory: Selected Essays from V.A.R., 1990-1994* (Routledge, 1994).
[110] Taylor, XII–XIII.

But what happens when the ground bottoms out and there are no longer coordinates or bearings? When north Korea is no longer the opposite of south Korea, and is no longer an unreachable place, but very much a place with its own cultural universe?

Marilyn Strathern's work has sought to make visible "the practice of anthropological description…which creates its own context in which ideas drawn from different social origins are kept distinct by reference to those origins," what Viveiros de Castro would perhaps align with the nature/culture tension inherent in Western "multiculturalist uninaturalism."[111] This is instructive for a place such as north Korea. Because this "context," which operates like "a kind of mirror-imagery" that which gives "form to our thoughts about the differences," is what for me began to unravel with my first visit.[112] Such was my experience of reeling from the crumbling ground of dichotomous relations that held north Korea together as a "place." And from these lessons I could try to produce a "good" translation of this newly visible cultural universe, one that, as Viveiros de Castro says, "betrays the destination language, not the source language," one that "allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator's conceptual toolbox so that the *intentio* of the original language can be expressed within the new one."[113]

For me, this loss of self is closely tied to the self-reflexivity inherited through "Francophone anthropology" that Hoon Song brings our attention to against the dominant "American theoretical idea" of self-reflexivity.[114] This "other" self-reflexivity is not seeking "a tireless amassing of contextualizations of the researcher's gaze within the political economy of knowledge," but is a self at risk of "self-division, even self-loss, which, in turn, is what sociality itself is about."[115] This brings to mind a similar negativity, Trinh Minh-ha's take on an infinite, endless reflexivity, because "[w]hen i say 'I see myself seeing myself,' I/i am not alluding to the illusory relation of subject to subject (or object) but to the play of mirrors that defers to infinity the real subject and subverts the notion of an original 'I'."[116] She has long critiqued the problem of the "actor-oriented" self in anthropological writing, a self "reconstructed or fashioned according to an individual's imagination," a self that depends on an "I" that must fundamentally be if ethnography is to be.[117] The question she poses is generative: "…can a critique of ethnographic writing be done without reflecting on its own writing? Without, through its practice of language, 'unsettling the identity of meaning and speaking/writing subject'?"[118]

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[111] Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 16–17; Viveiros de Castro, "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation." See also an article by Hoon Song that brings together these texts to critique what he sees as a return to "multicultural-particularist omni-comparativism": "Two Is Infinite, Gender Is Post-Social in Papua New Guinea," *Angelaki* 17, no. 2 (June 1, 2012): 134.
[112] Strathern, *The Gender of the Gift*, 17.
[113] "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation," 5.
[114] He says "Exposing, objectifying, and substantializing such a concealed gaze (of power) in the fashion of Foucault's work has been the goal par excellence of anthropological reflexivity"…where "the reflexive anthropologist volunteers to capture the heretofore visible anthropological eye 'from behind' as it were"…."In short, 'more context' was called for" (480). This is his way of bringing "the Foucauldian critique back into the fold of reflexive anthropology," see Hoon Song, "Seeing Oneself Seeing Oneself: White Nihilism in Ethnography and Theory," *Ethnos* 71, no. 4 (December 1, 2006): 470–88.
[115] Song, 481, 472.
[116] Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, 22.
[117] Trinh, 70–71.
[118] See footnote 64, Trinh, 157.

Anthropology, as a discipline faithful to undoing and recomposing itself, has plenty of resources for approaching method in the midst of this conundrum of the self. The "crisis of representation" of the 1980s that sought to "unfix, by literary therapy, the narrow frames in which ethnographies have typically been read,"[119] that led to powerful critiques of anthropology and ethnography exemplified by Trinh Minh-ha's writings and films and Lucien Taylor's work at Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab, did not lead to a sustained commitment to experimentation.[120] The editors of *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* while tracing the *Writing Culture* moment to a culmination of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities and humanistic social sciences, remark that it "seems marked most especially by a heightened suspicion of writing."[121] In other words, there was profound disciplinary liberation (unfixing) coupled with a growing anxiety in the impossible task of writing encounter, of adequately conveying a world embedded in structures of power (suspicion). In some ways, the moment at once opened the possibility of profoundly reconfiguring anthropology, its methods and forms of expression, while limiting the mobilization for such experimentation because the question of incommensurability and impossibility at the heart of every ethnographic endeavor was never fully dealt with.

Ironically, this moment seems to have proliferated a deep sense of mistrust in writing, especially modes too beautiful and seductive, that commune too intimately with "writerly powers and affects."[122] When taken to the political realm, this might invoke a dangerous play with authority where the power of word and image are usurped to state ends (e.g. propaganda), what might be called a "totalitarian aesthetic." The suspicion might also raise questions about iconoclasm.[123] It therefore remains safer to keep these powers and affects under control, so as not to let them slip into dangerous appropriations. But do not the modes of research and writing that tend to tame word and image also have a propensity toward its own "total" logic? As the contributors of *Crumpled Paper Boat* argue, "[w]riting can indeed be conscripted as a tool for the legitimation of power, but only because it can also exceed such appropriations," so the question remains, "[h]ow best to nurture these unruly capacities to challenge existing orders of meaning and feeling?"[124] This is where the question of the "self" emerges again as utterly crucial.

Is it indeed the "power of writing born of its own excessive and transgressive exteriority" we are after as anthropologists?[125] If the answer is yes, then should we not draw from all modes of sensuous experience to question and examine the ground of our writing? Then we'll need not a single "I" but its "infinite layers" and "differences grasped *both between* and *within* entities," where "I" is a site of infinite "interchange."[126] It is with this self, this other reflexivity, that I position method and writing. It is an autoethnography to the extent that the "she" is "not so much

[119] George E. Marcus, "Afterword: Ethnographic Writing and Anthropological Careers," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (University of California Press, 1986), 266.
[120] See Ch 2 "The Language of Nativism: Anthropology as a Scientific Conversation of Man with Man" in Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*. Also her films *Reassemblage: From the Firelight to the Screen*, 1983; *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, 1989.
[121] "Introduction: Archipelagos, A Voyage in Writing," in *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* (Duke University Press, 2017), 15.
[122] *Crumpled Paper Boat: Experiments in Ethnographic Writing* (Duke University Press, 2017), 15.
[123] Jason Frank, "Living Image of the People," in *The Scaffolding of Sovereignty: Global and Aesthetic Perspectives on the History of a Concept* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 124–56.
[124] "Introduction: Archipelagos, A Voyage in Writing," 16.
[125] *Crumpled Paper Boat*, 16.
[126] Trinh, *Woman, Native, Other*, 94.

a subject position" but a "point of impact, curiosity, and encounter" that brings scenes into view.[127] Scenes of distance and intimacy in "a shared zone of impossibility," one punctured self in the field of another.[128]

[127] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 5.
[128] "An Autoethnography of What Happens," 661.


기념품상점
Souvenir Shop

I had waited all week to see him. I knew meetings had to be carefully orchestrated, planned in advance, but how? That was beyond me.

It was the night before my flight back to China, and there was no word from him, so I took it upon myself to ask one of the guides, one I didn't know very well.

Big mistake.

I was told he was in Wonsan, so he wouldn't be able to meet me.
I was told he was too busy to come.
I was probably being told to stop asking.

Then at 6 the next morning, I saw him get out of a taxi and wander around the entrance of the hotel. I was already on the bus to the airport, but managed to buy a few minutes. The whole thing was so painfully rushed, dizzying, and of course I never knew if I had gotten him in trouble.

If this were said in any other place, I wouldn't have noticed it.

We were sitting in the departures hall of the newly built airport in Pyongyang, drinking the canned Pokka coffees that I got for us. The others were taking the train to Beijing, so it was just the three of us now. Our guide suddenly got up and told us she'd be right back.

Something to go with the coffee, she said, excitedly opening up a box of biscuits. Apparently they were from a well-known, reputable brand – 금컵. She even bought me a box of cookies to take back to my parents in the US, insisting I bring them the next time I visit.

It was a tender moment. We both found ourselves trying to express something to the another, something difficult to articulate, the feeling of wanting to show care without quite knowing why or how.

Then a uniformed airport official approached us.

With a grimace, she told us that eating is prohibited here. We should move to the coffee shop if we want to eat. And I thought to myself, of course, we don't want to cause trouble, and as I began to gather my things, our guide responded with frustration, defending us, saying we were guests in this country, staring the official down until she gave up and left in a fluster.

She continued eating as if nothing had happened, so I did too.

Flashing a playful smile, she said, you know in our country we have this saying, "Rules, they are meant to be broken."

That was my last trip to the north.[129]

[129] The US government under the Trump administration placed a travel ban on north Korea in 2017 after the death of American college student Otto Warmbier who traveled to Pyongyang as part of a tourist group.

CHAPTER 2 /
WITHOUT YOU, THERE IS NO US

THE CAMPUS

> About ten minutes beyond downtown Pyongyang, after crossing Chungsong (Loyalty) Bridge and the Taedong River, we took an exit onto a narrow road with farmland on either side. This led to a gate bearing the school's name, with a tiny gatehouse on its left, beyond which the campus came into view. The place was so secluded that it might have been a sanitarium. There was a lot of concrete, and the dull heaviness of the buildings imbued the place with a sense of the forlorn. To the left was a slim, tall stone monument that reached higher than the nearby five-story building topped with massive letters spelling out LONG LIVE GENERAL KIM JONG IL, THE SUN OF THE 21st CENTURY! The building contained classrooms, and it was connected by an enclosed walkway to the cafeteria building, which was connected to a health clinic and bathhouse, which were in turn connected to the dormitories, so that the buildings and the walkway formed a sort of horseshoe. The walkways had windows on either side, and it struck me then that there was no privacy here, that anyone's movements were visible. The only structure not connected to the rest was an austere gray building to our right, which stood on its own.

This is the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology (PUST) as it comes into view in Suki Kim's controversial book *Without You, There is No Us*.[1] It presents the world of PUST, the gatehouse, the classrooms, the cafeteria, the walkway, the atmosphere and the spaces with a certain fixed gaze.[2]

I offer here a different way to enter these spaces drawing from my own experience as an instructor at PUST. To puncture the unity of the image, I borrow her title but inhabit it differently, *Without You, There Is No Us*.[3] I read it not as the obvious leitmotif of totalitarian indoctrination, of students singing and marching in blind allegiance to the Leaders, but as a question, a poetics, bringing to life the campus as a site of intensities and tensions that emerge in moments of a co-constituting unraveling. It looks to the encounter, the not yet, the emergent, the still to be known in an attempt "to trace the outlines of a possible world within the seams of this one."[4]

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[1] PUST is a collaborative, experimental project between Christian evangelical groups and the north Korean government started in 2010 to institute the first private English language University in the country, where foreign or "Western" instructors teach Korean students. Suki Kim, a Korean-American journalist and writer who has been reporting on north Korea since 2002, was an instructor there for six months in 2011. Her account of that experience, quoted here, is documented in the book *Without You, There Is No Us: My Time with the Sons of North Korea's Elite* (New York: Crown, 2014), 20–21. The title of the book comes from the chorus of a well-known north Korean song "No Motherland without You" or 당신이 없으면 조국도 없다: "Without you, there is no motherland, without you, there is no us."

[2] Kim worked undercover at PUST, gathering materials that would expose the truth about its political system. This method of course presumes a truth that is attainable through documentary evidence (whether photographs, video footage, or extensive notes detailing everything, in Kim's case 400 pages of notes). Truth is assumed to be discrete, retrievable, there to be unearthed. Kim positions the necessity of her undercover work in the following way: "As a virtual prison state, North Korea is a place where the act of journalism is nearly impossible. Talking to citizens will get you nothing more than the party line, and most information about North Korea is related by Western journalists, who either visit the country on brief press junkets or record and repackage the unverifiable accounts of defectors. Having been born and raised in South Korea, I am fluent in the country's language and culture, which enabled me to glean the subtleties beneath the surface, without the censoring presence of an official translator." From the article "The Reluctant Memoirist" in *The New Republic*: https://newrepublic.com/article/133893/reluctant-memoirist

[3] Like Kim, I also was an instructor at PUST, teaching business English during the 2014 summer term as part of a group of fifteen foreign teachers. I was unable to return for reasons still unknown to me because I stopped receiving responses to my inquiries from the administration, though I assume it is related to the publication of Suki Kim's book.

[4] Pandian, *A Possible Anthropology*, 4.

INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

The publication of *Without You, There is No Us* and the contradictory ways it was received brought to light Suki Kim's curious position as both insider and outsider. On the one hand, she received broad acclaim for this work, from high profile talks at TED and Google, to interviews on platforms such as The Daily Show, PBS, and the NYU School of Journalism. She was already an established and celebrated writer and journalist. Her first book, *The Interpreter*, was a finalist for the PEN/Hemingway Award, her work published in reputable magazines like Harper's, Slate, and The New Republic, and in highly regarded papers like The New York Times, The Washington Post, and The Guardian.[5]

Yet on the other hand, she was slammed for her "unethical" undercover work, interrogated for not being undercover at all, called out for framing an investigative piece as a memoir, and harassed on social media. Kim writes that her book was "dismissed for the very element that typically wins acclaim for narrative accounts of investigative journalism."[6] The backlash she received came from certain segments of the Western journalist community, the Christian administration of PUST, as well as from people with a long history of engagement with both Koreas. From Kim's perspective however, the criticism was unfounded, astounding, especially given that like many journalists before and after her, she was simply contributing to the same project of locating the *real* north Korea, the one hidden from the outside world that must be brought to light.[7]

What was it about Kim's book that prompted such conflicting responses? After all, she did everything right. She espoused and embodied the values of the American liberal left, immigrant success, secular reason, democracy, human rights, giving voice and freedom to the oppressed, so why such a backlash? She attempts to set the record straight in an essay called "The Reluctant Memoirist" where she openly comes to terms with her critics. She decisively offers orientalism, gender discrimination, and racism as reasons for the "systematic undermining" of her "expertise,"

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[5] *The Interpreter* (New York: Picador, 2004).

[6] According to Kim, the reviews were particularly troubling: "When the first review was published by *Kirkus*, I was shocked to see the words "deceive" and "deception" three times in the first paragraph. The *Chicago Tribune* questioned my ethics: "Her book raises difficult questions about whether this insight is worth the considerable risk to these innocents, none of whom knew her real reasons for being there." The *Los Angeles Review of Books* went even further: "Her dishonesty has left her open to criticism, and rightfully so. The ethics of her choice cast doubt on her reliability (another de facto peril of memoir), and her fear of discovery appears to have colored her impressions and descriptions with paranoia and distrust." Excerpt from her essay "The Reluctant Memoirist" in *The New Republic*: https://newrepublic.com/article/133893/reluctant-memoirist

[7] For a few representative examples, see the BBC Panorama series on north Korea: "Educating North Korea" with footage from the Pyongyang University of Science and Technology as well as the episode hosted by the British investigative journalist John Sweeney, where he "posed as a university professor leading a group of students from the London School of Economics during an eight-day trip in 2013. Though in Sweeney's case, his undercover work created a media frenzy in Britain, where he was criticized for endangering the lives of his charges," but of course no mention of the risks he posed to his Korean guides and interlocutors. See The New York Times book review by Jane Perlez: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/19/books/review/north-korea-confidential-and-north-korea-undercover.html. Sweeney's undercover work eventually led to a book *North Korea Undercover: Inside the World's Most Secret State* (New York London: Pegasus Books, 2016). See also the work of David Guttenfelder for AP Press and the New York Times, for instance, *Illuminating North Korea*: https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/10/world/asia/north-korea-photos-video.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=REGIWALL

as reasons that reveal her painful exclusion from "the insular world of journalism," a "profession still dominated by white men."[8] From her standpoint, *Without You, There is No Us* is a "serious investigative book on a dictatorship," and it is absurd that it has not been fully acknowledged as such.[9] She desires so much to be inside, but finds herself in a space not quite.

The way her work was received by the south Korean press provides another framing of this tension. In contrast to Western critics, the impulse there was less about the moral qualms of Kim's secretive undertaking, but more about the veracity of her account. Kim's book was pitted against Shin Eun Mi's 재미동포 아줌마 북한에 가다 / *A Korean-American Ajumma Goes to North Korea*, two very different takes on north Korea as presented by Korean-Americans. Both offered the kind of "inside" look that south Koreans rarely have access to because travel between north and south is almost impossible for most ordinary citizens, let alone journalists or academics.[10] The fixation became about who was telling the truth. Was it the "pro-North" Shin, hated by both south Korean conservatives and north Korean defectors alike, who describes her travels in the north as the most beautiful and saddest experience in the world? Or was it "anti-North" Kim, the journalist with connections to well-regarded American publications, who worked undercover for six months, who describes north Korea as the most horrible place on earth?[11] In some ways, these two views represent the polarity of south Korean politics vis-à-vis the north, which scrambles the left-right opposition as understood in the U.S.

A conclusion wasn't reached of course, but the political climate at the time was such that Shin became the target of "anti-North" hate crimes, as exemplified by a student who tried to kill her with a homemade bomb during a talk. Shin's position as "pro-North" was amplified in such a way by the conservative administration at the time that it resulted in her deportation from south Korea for 5 years under the National Security Law.[12] This implicitly renders Kim's "anti-North"

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[8] "The Reluctant Memoirist" published in 2016 in *The New Republic*:
https://newrepublic.com/article/133893/reluctant-memoirist

[9] See "The Reluctant Memoirist"

[10] The comparison of these two Korean-American accounts may be attributed to their timely coincidence. Suki Kim's book was translated into Korean in 2015, retitled as "An English Teacher in Pyongyang" (my translation), with the ideological reference of its original title and cover image removed. This intersected with the increasing visibility of Shin Eun Mi, as she gave numerous talks around the country. Note that Shin's book only exists in Korean. See 수키 김, 평양의 영어 선생님: 북한 고위층 아들들과 보낸 아주 특별한 북한 체류기, trans. 홍권희 (디오네, 2015). 신은미, 재미동포 아줌마 북한에 가다 (네잎클로바, 2012).

[11] This binary of "pro-North" and "anti-North" presented here is framed in the following article, but also repeated across many other newsmedia publications and programs:
https://www.donga.com/news/article/all/20141209/68426676/1
Some examples from south Korean media:
https://www.ytn.co.kr/_ln/0101_201412091922048904
https://www.chosun.com/site/data/html_dir/2014/12/09/2014120900350.html0101_201412091922048904
https://www.yna.co.kr/view/AKR20150123111700014?input=1195m

[12] These events unfolded during the Park Geun-hye administration, where Shin Eun Mi was accused of praising and sympathizing with north Korea as well as anti-state groups under the National Security Law. As John Lie and Myoungkyu Park explain, the National Security Law, although most readily identified with "the authoritarian crux of the national security apparatus under the authoritarian regimes of Presidents Park Chung-hee and Chun Doo-hwan from the 1960s to the 1980s," it is also mobilized by those ideologically opposed to the National Security Law in order "to deploy its rules and tools to squelch opposition." See "South Korea in 2005: Economic Dynamism, Generational Conflicts, and Social Transformations," *Asian Survey* 46, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 59–60. For a sense of how this was framed in the US media:

position as the acceptable version of truth in that moment, where, unfortunately for Kim, her leftist liberal values suddenly take on right wing associations in the south Korean political context. In this differently ordered realm where "the core political identity" of the nation still coalesces around "anti-North Korean (and anticommunist) ideology," her claim that north Korea is the most horrible place on earth is one that becomes aligned with conservatism, rather than American liberal progressivism.[13]

Regardless of whether she sees the implications of this position within these two very different political landscapes, Kim is once again not an insider. Korean "leftist," progressive politics is very different from American liberal politics because it is always figured in relation to the north, not as an enemy of the south, but as a tragic reminder of loss, national division, and the continuing legacy of foreign occupation. In this sense, a Korean-American liberal politics is not a possible position of inside, as there is something irreconcilable in that hyphenated identity, something that remains incommensurable, ambivalent, fractured, and displaced.

It seems this position of not quite inside is what haunts her the most. For Kim, the loss that comes with war, the effects of a country divided, leaving one's homeland, personal struggle with identity as an immigrant are things that must be overcome, that which forms the basis of her writing.[14] She says, "I have been forced to use my writing not to explore topics of my own choosing, or to investigate the world's complexities, but as a means to legitimize myself."[15] I take this to mean that she writes in order to locate herself on the inside.

She mobilizes Koreanness to lend authenticity and legitimacy to her work, and it helps uniquely position her as an insider within this milieu.[16] The problem is that she is too faithful to the notion of self from the inside, too committed to liberal democratic subjectivity and the fusing of Korean identity within it that there is no longer any otherness. "When you lose your home at a young age, you spend your life looking for its replacement," she says, but this search for home, for the security of locatedness, ends up isolating her even more.[17]

There is incredible sorrow and vulnerability in unbelonging, and perhaps Kim's way of approaching writing in this way even highlights a naïve innocence, but it is her insistence on writing from the inside that provokes the criticisms, perpetuating problematic narratives such as the American Dream, democratic freedom, Korean nationalism, Asian collectivist thinking, the value of secular life over religious life, the idea of America as here and Korea as there, the belief

https://www.nytimes.com/2015/01/11/world/asia/south-korea-to-deport-american-over-warm-words-about-north-korea.html

[13] Lie and Park, 60.

[14] There are numerous instances in her writing that suggest this, but in one particularly poignant moment, she says: "Both my parents hail from families separated by the partition. And it is really the unrequited heartbreak of those separations—a heartbreak that lasts generations—that brought me North." See *Without You, There Is No Us*, 11. It is implicitly understood that every Korean experiences this loss, if not directly, then through another's memory.

[15] See "The Reluctant Memoirist"

[16] This is where the genre of "memoir" intersects with "autobiography." Trinh T. Minh-ha says "The unique, out-of-the-ordinary story of an individual is what our society likes to consume. It may offer an interesting within-bounds difference, but this focus on personality, private life, and contained individualism is ultimately comforting as it is easily consumable." See *D-Passage: The Digital Way*, 65.

[17] *Without You, There Is No Us*, 10.

that her Korea is south Korea, "the industrial, overachieving, better half."[18] So she performs Korean-American liberal identity too predictably, too faithfully, ticking all of the right boxes, presenting north Korea as a consumable and legible entity to the American liberal left and the Western mainstream media where she locates herself.[19]

She may feel caught up in "longing, loss, hurt, regret, guilt" but that perhaps is the very place where critical reflection becomes possible.[20] Freud suggests that melancholia offers contact with revelatory knowledge.[21] And in that sense, in her grief, she follows her intuition to bring together the "autobiographical" with the "journalistic investigation." But in grasping too tightly to both categories, she produced neither memoir nor investigative study.

There are revelatory moments in the book when she occupies the "autobiographical" in a different sense, as "an intimate site of self-as-other inscription, or of both personal and collective subjectivities," in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words.[22] These are moments when she writes unbelonging tenderly, carefully, artfully.[23] It is in this way that I reoccupy her title, *Without You, There is No Us*, salvaging those instants of refusal and excess from her writing woven into my own.

[18] She frames her project as such: "I thought that if only I could understand the place, then I could find a way to help put the fragments back together." See 10.
[19] 10.
[20] 10.
[21] The melancholic seems "only to be grasping the truth more keenly than others who are not melancholic" …and "he may as far as we know have come quite close to self-knowledge, and we can only wonder why one must become ill in order to have access to such truth." See Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Penguin Freud Reader*, ed. Adam Phillips (Penguin Books, 2006), 313.
[22] *D-Passage: The Digital Way*, 65–66.
[23] This notion of "unbelonging" as a "way-making tool" is from Christina Sharpe's framing of Black experience in her discussion of Dionne Brand's poem "Ruttier for the Marooned in the Diaspora." See *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press Books, 2016), 106–7.

THERE ARE NO SECRETS AT PUST

It is impossible to be in north Korea without reflecting on secrecy—one's history, thoughts, intentions in the encounter with a state apparatus of surveillance.

When a first-year student said to me, *there are no secrets at PUST*, it threw me for a loop. It was an offhanded comment casually blurted out as we stood in line for lunch, that somehow all of the foreign instructors knew about his interest in philosophy, despite having only told one person. But it struck me as so odd, so peculiar because in fact the entire social fabric of the campus was made of the stuff of secrets. The comment, then, did not confirm some truth about life at PUST, but rather, cut open "another view via another frame," as Michael Taussig would say, something in the realm of shared secrets, public secrets, open secrets, or "*knowing what not to know*."[24] The crucial point that keeps me returning to this scene is not the truth of the student's interest in philosophy revealed, or the truth of our assumptions about totalitarian experience, but the way in which it illuminated a negativity, a complicity, a way of secretly yet openly presencing what Taussig calls "the spectral radiance of the unsaid."[25]

Of course, we know there are monitors in every class reporting on class activities and recording lessons. We assume the rooms are bugged and our internet activities monitored. We submit all of our lessons plans for approval before introducing anything new in our classes. We work through a copy machine attendant to make handouts for the students. We are warned to be careful what we say and when because we don't know how things can be misconstrued, especially with regard to political topics.

Of course, the campus is structured in a certain way, framed by a walkway system designed to protect you from extreme weather, but that also gives you a bird's eye view of the movements on the ground.

Of course, everything is noticed. Appearances, accents, handwriting, demeanor, as well as things like laptops, phones, cameras, it is all noticed. It is noticed who sits with who in the cafeteria. It is noticed what you eat and how much.

And yet, despite this awareness that *there are no secrets at PUST*, certain moments in certain spaces radiated with "a strange surplus of negative energy," moments that "cut into wholeness as holiness that, in sundering, reveals, as with film montage, not only another view via another frame, but released flows of energy."[26]

Kim explains that writing about north Korea with any depth is impossible unless you are embedded there, but it's not as if going undercover as a journalist magically releases one from the

[24] For Taussig the distinction between secret and public secret is in the undoing of secrecy's relation to truth, troubling the understanding that a secret is something to be unmasked, exposed, and thus knowable. Instead, his idea of the public secret holds power in "active not-knowing" (7). See *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 2.
[25] Taussig, 6.
[26] Taussig, 1, 3.

regime of surveillance.[27] No one can fully evade this dimension of life in north Korea, not even the north Koreans themselves, so perhaps it is this very dimension, the realm of secrecy, that should be attended to, inhabited, felt, and made manifest instead of overcome.[28] How deep is the reach of "the state"? That is, how much does "the state" know and how much can it know? These are impossible questions because "the state" is not a locatable entity. It is ever intimate, but always distant. So when Kim says "rumors circulated fast in this tiny community—not surprising, perhaps, since most things were visible from every corner," she too faithfully reiterates assumptions about totalitarian surveillance.[29] And she is too committed to what Taussig calls the "ideology or secret of secrecy," to the idea that indeed *there are no secrets at PUST*, and is therefore bound to overlook the public secret not accessible to vision since it is figured negatively.[30]

Kim's account is rooted in a political reality where transparency is a societal ideal, where transparency is equated to freedom and information and truth, what Byung-Chul Han would trace to the proliferation of "positivity."[31] For Han, transparency "is inherently positive. It does not harbor negativity that might radically question the political-economic system as it stands. It is blind to what lies outside the system. It confirms and optimizes only what already exists."[32]

This is a world in which we don't know how to talk about secrets, we don't know how to make sense of, live with, and through secrets.[33] Instead, secrets become opposed to truth, and consequently the logic of "the transparency society," as Han calls it, is one of exposure, unveiling, and revealing the truth hidden beneath the secret, that seeks a world of "[t]otal illumination" and "see-through communication" that scorches the soul, that leaves no corners and violently erases otherness and alterity.[34] If there can be no autonomy, no politics, no life without secrets, as Taussig and Han articulate, and secrecy offers "the possibility of a second world alongside the manifest world," as Georg Simmel suggests, this chapter looks to the limit, the verge, the interval of the public secret "where the secret is not destroyed through exposure, but subject to a revelation that does justice to it."[35]

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[27] She explicitly states this in a 2016 Moth episode called "Undercover in North Korea with its Future Leaders." See https://themoth.org/stories/undercover-in-north-korea-with-its-future-leaders

[28] In reference to "North Korea -- A Mini Guide" by Morten Traavik, where he describes his thoughts on freedom of movement to Laibach and their crew in preparation for their big Pyongyang concert: "Just to be clear: There is no freedom of movement for anyone in North Korea. Not for Koreans themselves, but even more so for foreigners. For instance, it is not allowed to leave the hotel on your own (you'll get lost pretty soon anyway). We'll be moving around mostly as one big group, Japanese-tourist style, except for some occasions with different parallel work activities when we'll split into two or three groups, each with their own Korean guides. It's very different how people visiting NK for the first time react to this, some have no problems with these enforced restrictions on movement, some do. My advice is not to let this given condition – which is equal for everyone – annoy you. Look at it as part of the authentic NK experience."
See http://www.liberationday.film/propaganda-type/extras/

[29] Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*, 45.

[30] Taussig, *Defacement*, 58.

[31] See "The Society of Positivity" in Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford University Press, 2015).

[32] Han, 7.

[33] Many thanks to Joshua Craze for our discussions on redaction that led me here.

[34] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 3.

[35] Georg Simmel, "The Secret and Secret Society," in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* (Free Press, 1950), 330; Taussig, *Defacement*, 8.

THE CAFETERIA

Whether it is a Soviet *stolovaya*, a co-op dining hall, a side-alley canteen, or a university cafeteria in Pyongyang, the aim of each is to feed masses of people in the most efficient, economical way possible. These things are like machines. They can operate at very high capacity with just a few attendants, a couple of people refilling industrial vats of watery soup, trays of steaming rice, a couple of *banchan*, and everyday there are three hot meals at PUST.

The cafeteria was unremarkable in that it was "the kind of cafeteria you might see anywhere. Past the heavy glass door was a huge hall packed with tables."[36] But it was also one of the most interesting places because the entire campus population passed through its doors three times a day, the students, the administrators both foreign and local, the Chinese Korean maintenance crew, the Foreign Affairs office, the campus guards, the kitchen staff, and us, the foreign instructors. It was as much a space of rigid, militant efficiency as it was a space of convergence, social life, tensions, and scenes that could only unfold there. Unlike the classrooms and offices, the portraits of the Leaders were not on the walls there.

The social scene of the cafeteria radiated with the aura of the unsaid, the public secret, "*that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated.*"[37]

"The question of seating could be complicated."[38] There was an understanding that seating arrangements or "appointments" should be made prior to mealtime. There were rules, notions of how we should conduct ourselves, general guidelines about what to say and not to say, but it was all a bit awkward. As in any new social context, the interactions were jerky, confused, and felt out in the moment, meal by meal, table by table.

Most of the foreign instructors devised ways to negotiate this awkwardness. Many were teaching at PUST for the second or third time, and found a system that worked for them. They created sign-up sheets in order to have at least one meal with each of their students. Others made a point of eating with as many different students as possible. Some only ate with other teachers or administrators. I decided to wait until someone invited me to a meal or invited myself to random tables with empty seats, though that usually only intensified the awkwardness.

The students had their ways too. There were the kids that couldn't be bothered, that never really took an interest in the teachers, always sitting amongst themselves in the same groups. The ones that weren't as confident in their language skills were naturally a bit timid and more hesitant. Some made quick advances, asking any and all of the foreign instructors to eat with them, as if the only thing that mattered was language practice. These are the ones that ask after your hobbies, hometown, major, painstakingly repeating exercises from class. "Sometimes a meal felt like an interrogation, either vocal or silent."[39] And sometimes we would find ourselves in "the exact kind of discussion we had been warned against."[40] But sometimes things would come

[36] Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*, 23.
[37] Taussig, *Defacement*, 5.
[38] Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*, 62.
[39] Kim, 69.
[40] Kim, 96.

together in just the right way, where mealtime became not just a time to practice English, but also a world unto itself, a space of curiosity, friendship, stories, popularity contests, inside jokes, and spreading innocuous rumors about each other, that were mediated by English, but in unexpected and unpredictable ways.

I was standing in line for lunch when a student approached me with a grammar question. He wanted to know, could I kindly explain the difference between present participle phrases and gerund phrases? When I furrowed my brow in confusion, he explained that another teacher had sent him because I was the "expert" in English grammar. In the periphery, I noticed fits of laughter coming from the other line.

One evening a few students asked about my plans after dinner. The teachers have an "evening activity," I explained, gesturing to another teacher. This was a play on the "afternoon activity" we led as part of the summer curriculum, but I intentionally didn't divulge any more than that. This drove the students crazy, leaving them determined to crack the code of our secret activities.

Kim too writes of such moments: "At the mention of Jun-ho's disastrous ways with girls, all four of us burst out laughing. *Disaster* would become a favorite word for the boys that summer, almost a private joke. They loved saying it under any circumstances—sometimes they would say 'disaster food,' or that an exam had been a disaster."[41]

The unfolding of these scenes produced a hum, a buzz, an energetic atmosphere that filled the cafeteria. It was a feeling out of who was friends with who, who was funny, who was boring, who spoke better English, who was the best soccer player, who was attractive, in short, who was cool. "'How can I learn English better, Professor?' was the question I heard at almost every meal," Kim recounts, and as the first English language university in the country, of course, English was *the* domain of "mutual concern."[42] But I take this up not with irony, and not as a "cover" or the thing to hide behind, as Kim does, but as the public secret that makes this "second world" possible, and it is within this negativity that the other "manifest world" becomes differently visible and inhabitable.[43]

When the foreign teachers returned from a weekend excursion to the newly built Munsu Waterpark, I got wind of a rumor during lunch that I am a really good swimmer (I'm not), and that my husband doesn't swim (he does). It was a thing in circulation, that we went to the waterpark, and that made actual another life in another world that was worth speculating about.

What are some of the famous buildings in central Seoul? A student wanted to know.

"At such moments, it was as though we were sitting in any school cafeteria anywhere."[44] Something like "normal life" or the everyday is presenced and this becomes a possible thing to say because we all saw, felt, and occupied this other world, there within and between the bounds and rules of the campus, though always obliquely and at a distance, in the mode of peripheral

[41] Kim, 65–66.
[42] Kim, 63.
[43] Georg Simmel, *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans. Kurt H. Wolff (Free Press, 1950), 330.
[44] Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*, 66.

vision. Alexei Yurchak discusses the concept of "normal life" / нормальная жизнь as a particular social form that emerges in the Soviet system, where "living socialism…often meant something quite different from the official interpretations provided by state rhetoric," and where Soviet citizens "were able to deterritorialize time, space, relations, and meanings of the socialist system" by existing through and alongside its very principles.[45] It is a world at once distant and intimate that can be entered without special access or hiding undercover, but only in the recognition of a shared sociality that exists alongside the disorienting and uncomfortable ambiguity, when the frame is not already drawn up. This moment of mutual recognition, what Yurchak calls *svoi*, is "a shared space of 'normal life' not in opposition to the state, but within it, thanks to it and despite it."[46] My point is that this kind of sociality, the recognition of one another as *svoi* in the socialist and postsocialist realm, can also be extended to north Korea as a system undergirded by a similar political logic.[47]

"When the lights went out, darkness fell so abruptly and completely that I could almost touch it…There were many evenings when I would stand in the corridor with a flashlight so that the students could find their way to the cafeteria for dinner…Yet there were moments when the blackouts felt like an adventure…"[48]

[45] See Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 8, 121. Daze Dzenovksa also works through the notion of "normal life" in the context of a border crossing, where this kind of sociality emerges. She puts emphasis on the fact that this "is not a product of universal humanism as a relation of empathy or compassion, but rather of historically formed public sociality as a relation of recognition of another as an equal.".
[46] See Yurchak's response to Dzenovska's essay and his elaboration of the sociality of *svoi* in "Comment on Dace Dzenovska's 'Bordering Encounters,'" *Social Anthropology* 22, no. 3 (2014): 296. Also *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 103.
[47] See Chapter 3 of this dissertation.
[48] Kim, *Without You, There Is No Us*, 214. r

FLIRTING

A friend asks –

Risk, seduction, keeping cards close to your chest but secretly (or quietly) hoping for more. Is north Korea the hard to get object of affection (or desire or something) or is flirting, with all of its exhilaration, risk, and endeavor, hope, and fear *the* form of sociality that you get when experiencing north Korea? That actually makes sense to me if so...[49]

Flirting is in the body. Flirting is so ordinary. Flirting is the feel or sense or friction in the interaction between, the said and unsaid, the seen and unseen, and the sometimes sticky sometimes smooth sometimes brittle broken intervals that connect them. The problem with most understandings of north Korea is that there's not enough body. It's all eyes, prying, deep, glassy, and no body. Just picture the satellite image of the peninsula at night, the north enveloped in darkness, the south full of the promise of light, but total illumination, too much exposure and over-focus can be violent.[50]

That's when we move to the body. What does the body feel in north Korea? What atmospheres, textures, what kind of punch in the gut?

Flirting is liberating because it is expansive, pure potentiality, volatile, composed of infinite movements between and within the open and the hidden, the accessible and inaccessible, the public secret. Flirting is also disorienting because it is lived opacity, the experience of an unless or until. I was nauseous in its uncertainty, its instability, throwing me to and fro, like being at sea, except I was the sea.[51]

There is a double movement to flirting because there is always a way in which everything and nothing is flirting. Something about flirting allows a relation to be forged, to feel the things that can't be spoken, to inhabit the things that can't be seen, within a negativity, a certain mediated distance. But if I sense danger, if we stumble into an unbearable zone, if a boundary is transgressed, the other space of rules and expectations is always in arms reach.

For Adam Phillips the "atmosphere of uncertainty" it creates is one of pleasure as much as it is of learning.[52] Flirting is "an attempt to re-open, to rework, the plot; to find somewhere else, in the philosophers William James's words, 'to go from.'"[53] "Flirtation keeps things in play, and by

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[49] Personal communication with my friend Jason Price regarding the first paper I gave about my work: "North Korean Holiday," January 2014 at UC Berkeley.

[50] As Byung-Chul Han says, "The heroic project of transparency—wanting to tear down veils, bring everything to light, and drive away darkness—leads to violence." See *The Transparency Society*, 44. For a reframing of this image not as truth but as composite, as fabricated, as producing certain ways of seeing, refer to Suzy Kim's introduction in her book *Everyday Life in the North Korean Revolution, 1945–1950* (Cornell University Press, 2013)., and also David Shim, *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing Is Believing* (Routledge, 2014).

[51] I am thinking here about the "oceanic feeling," "a sensation of 'eternity,'" "a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded," which Sigmund Freud in correspondence with Romain Rolland grapples with in the opening of *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (W. W. Norton & Company, 1961), 11.

[52] Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (Harvard University Press, 1994), xxiii.

[53] Phillips, xxv.

doing so lets us get to know them in different ways."[54] For Simmel, flirtation holds "the charm of secrecy."[55] It is the open secret. It is the "sidelong glance with the head half-turned" though the "glance cannot last longer than a few seconds, so that the withdrawal of the glance is already prefigured as something unavoidable in the glance itself."[56] For Han, drawing from Eva Illouz's writings, the play of flirtation might be likened to seduction, employing "ambivalence and ambiguity" to enable a "certain form of freedom from morality…power and freedom…the capacity to say something without meaning it, the capacity to imply several meanings at once."[57] Which is the inherent "negativity of the secret."[58]

In these renderings, flirting is a method, an approach, a mode of observation. According to Simmel, it is a social form in which "the indecisiveness of life is crystallized into a thoroughly positive way of acting."[59] That is, "it is a part of the problematic of life that there are many things with regard to which life has no unambiguous, a prior, settled locus, even though life cannot simply repudiate a relationship to them. Because of its own characteristic form, life does not fit properly into the place that these things provide for our conduct and sensibilities."[60]

Each is trying to feel out the other, trying to get a sense for what else there is, what else there can be, in the composition and decomposition of scenes. This is "an effort to stay in the middle of things," following Kathleen Stewart, and it is "transpersonal or prepersonal—not about one person's feeling becoming another's but about bodies literally affecting one another and generating intensities: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought, bodies of water."[61]

"It was a fine dance," and this is where I overlap and yet also part ways with Kim, as her fidelity to self and the boundary of that self is the very thing that leads to burnout.[62]

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[54] Phillips, xii.
[55] Georg Simmel, *Georg Simmel, on Women, Sexuality, and Love*, trans. Guy Oakes (Yale University Press, 1984), 135.
[56] Simmel, 134–35.
[57] Han, *The Transparency Society*, 15.
[58] Han, 15.
[59] Simmel, *Georg Simmel, on Women, Sexuality, and Love*, 151.
[60] Simmel, 151.
[61] Kathleen Stewart in conversation with Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* in *Ordinary Affects*, 128.
[62] She says: "We were always wary of one another. And this incessant circling around the boundary and our efforts not to breach it were exhausting. We wanted to discover things about one another, yet if we stumbled across such information, we both froze." See *Without You, There Is No Us*, 70.

THE WALKWAY

An elevated walkway connected every building, with the exception of the Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism Ideology Center. It was the one place foreign instructors were not allowed to enter. When it rained, as it often did during monsoon season, everyone utilized the walkway that connected the dorms and faculty housing to the administrative building, cafeteria, classrooms, and offices.

A hyper focused vision would miss the atmosphere, the textures, the density of moods that cannot be reduced to the visible.[63] Things like smell, the quality of light, echoes, the kind of spaces traversed within the different zones of the walkway corridor. Cigarettes from the grad dorm. Whispers of conversations and the way sounds reverberated. The break that marked the hall that leads to the undergraduate dorm. Socks drying in the window. The diffused light refracted from the concrete and the flat, dusty cerulean paint.

It was a summer without smells in that people just didn't smell like the things I'm used to. There was no lingering laundry detergent, soap, toothpaste, coffee, perfume, or other such things that imbue the American body.

Until a rainy afternoon in the damp corridor.

A smell hangs in the walkway.

Is he wearing cologne?

It cut through the space like a radiant flash in the dark.

No one wears cologne except the European instructor.

I was sure it was my student, and it was saying something, doing something, invisibly, silently, but what?

To smell something so distinct in a landscape usually devoid of such smells leaves a cavernous impression, a punctum of aroma, or a tactile sensation, as Svetlana Boym would call it.[64] My nostalgia is both for the smell of this no smell and for the smell of my student's cologne in this otherworldly sociality. It's a smell I know and at once don't know. It's the smell of accumulated time, a smell that doesn't evoke person or place, but rather the nostalgic time of a red dream. And in the sensuous passage to this time out of time, there is a socialist banner at the end of the corridor, but no one can make out the words.

[63] Kim likens the walkway system to a panopticon, from the "horseshoe" form it made around the campus to the way windows framed its enclosure, so that "there was no privacy," that "anyone's movements were visible." See Kim, 21.
[64] *The Future of Nostalgia* (Basic Books, 2001), 50.

THE SOCCER FIELD

Soccer was at the center of social life on campus. The students played basketball and volleyball too, but it was soccer that occupied everyone's minds. During the first summer school session at PUST in 2011, one of the foreign instructors, a former professional soccer player, began the legendary tradition of the PUST Cup. She describes the moment of its inception, when her former life as a member of the Australian Women's National Team spread through the school and students began coming up to her in the cafeteria, curious to learn more about this illustrious past, the story sometimes circulating in exaggerated form.[65] The tournament was framed in terms of English language pedagogy, where students were taught soccer terminology in preparation for the games, and in the second year of the PUST Cup, penalty cards were given for speaking Korean on the field.

I observed the afterglow of this in the summer of 2014. Thankfully one of the teachers took the lead on organizing the PUST Cup, which coincided with the actual FIFA World Cup and amplified the soccer fervor even more. When we arrived at PUST at the end of June, everyone was already deep into the developments of the World Cup. The games aired at the unfortunate times of 4am and 7am in Korea, but the Dean of the Foreign Language Department posted the scores on her office door every morning, and when our group arrived, we kept this tradition going. The students would gather around after breakfast to be looped into the latest results, to study and analyze the scores. Every time they passed the door, they would stop to look again, multiple times a day. And not just students, but Korean faculty too.

Soccer, on the field and in the classroom, enveloped within the project of language learning, was part of this second, manifest world of the open and the hidden.

At dusk, on a particularly humid evening, standing deep in mud, the earth saturated from days of rain, surrounded by mosquitoes, we watched our star player on the field.

As we stood on the sideline of a PUST Cup match, he told me he learned the word "freaking idiot" from our film screening earlier that day.

Teachers should not talk to students one on one.

But on the field that rule never seemed to hold.

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[65] In case it is not obvious, the PUST Cup is a spin on the World Cup. The teacher made a short video of her experience at PUST in Korean, and describes the way the PUST Cup came about as an idea. Some team names from the inaugural PUST Cup that struck me: No losses, Turtles, PUST United, Dolphins, Hopeless Losers, Future. Link to the video can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrP8xLfQxkA&feature=emb_rel_end&ab_channel=highersites

THE CLASSROOM

I once waited for a student at the entrance of the cafeteria. I wanted to know why he didn't write anything during our quiz that morning. He told me he didn't have a pencil.

Why didn't he tell me, I could have…

But before I could finish, before he could answer, another student from the class quickly approached, wrapping his arm around the student and pulling him away.

Teachers should not talk to students one on one.
Of course, I knew that.

The next day I got to the classroom early to put a pencil on his desk. The look on his face, the slightest hint of a smile as he looked up at me, was something communicated obliquely.

There were other moments like this within the open and the hidden, but they were much rarer in the classroom. I had a tough time settling into my role as a teacher, troubled by the expectations put before me. Looking back at my experience now, perhaps I had convinced myself that the classroom was a different kind of space, more rigid, more rules, as the feeling of being observed and scrutinized unnerved me. There was a curriculum to be followed that had been drawn up before my arrival. There were my own anxieties around teaching business English, neoliberal finance and management concepts in a socialist context. Our classes were called "Extra English," because the summer semester is not taken for credit, and although mandatory, this fact didn't do much in the way of motivating the students.

Their initial enthusiasm at the novelty of a new teacher wore off quickly, and like me, the students soon grew tired of the textbook exercises, the rote memorization of arbitrary business terms, and we eventually came to inhabit a strange expanse, withdrawn from one another's presence in a vast emptiness. There was a veneer of respect intact, but I had lost the class. And in this disjuncture, intimidated by their coolness, exhausted from so much uncertainty and self-doubt, I started to loathe entering the classroom.

When I walked around the room, those in the back that had stopped participating were studying Chinese, reading books in Korean, playing computer games. That was the breaking point, where I could no longer carry on in this manner. It made me question what I was doing, and most crucially, to rethink the limits and expectations of teaching this class. Because beyond the fact that I was teaching in north Korea, I was still a teacher with a responsibility to facilitate language learning.

I wrote a letter to the students.

I needed to say the unsaid.

And once I cut into the vast emptiness of our forlorn being together, I finally found a footing.

I decided to abandon the textbook and reimagine what the syllabus could look like for the remaining week of class. I looked for documentaries and readings based on what I knew of their interests, real life examples of entrepreneurship, Steve Jobs (because I sensed their interest in Apple), readings about start-ups, crowdfunding, and branding (because it had come up in class discussions), and a film about José Mourinho, because I wanted to honor their love of soccer, and I could legitimately relate the story of this famous football manager to the field of business management. I created vocabulary lists from the new material. I incorporated more impromptu style speaking exercises. And to my surprise, it was all approved by the Korean administration, at a rush no less.

This enabled me to slowly build another kind of class.

On the last day at least, at last, it felt like we were really a class. We played charades. Everything shifted. Only then was I finally able to take out my camera in front of the students, the camera I had always carried with me, but could never use. Only then was I able to take a photo of them, which was not an image of the class as much as it was an image of that which could not be symbolized, the shared world we inhabited together, however briefly, however ambiguously, however awkwardly.

THE OFFICE

It was almost lunchtime. I sat in my office in a dull stupor watching the steam release from my thermos, listening to the rain, daydreaming the wildness of the past weeks.

When I looked up, with what must have been a blank look on my face, there was a student at my door. None of my students had ever come to my office before, so it was especially shocking to see him, the guy who can't be bothered with anything besides soccer, who never once spoke in class, who barely acknowledged me in the halls.

He wanted to know if we could eat dinner together.
뭐, 약속이 없으시면 저녁 식사나 같이 할까 해서요…

Teachers should refrain from speaking Korean with the students.

I actually already had an "appointment" with the monitor of another class, but how could I decline?

Everything shifted.
We crossed a threshold and entered a world of Korean.

THE THRESHOLD

It was almost 7am. I cried so much the night before, had too much to drink, and too little sleep. Our bus to the airport was probably already at the entrance to the guesthouse.

Frantically, I made one last run to the trash pit behind the faculty housing, and hurriedly tried to bring order to the storm of the past four weeks. As I was shoving the last of my things into my backpack, I saw from the corner of my eye a figure in the doorway.

It was one of my students.

I let out a shriek, clutching my chest and bracing myself against the wall.

A group of my students had come to see me off.
What were they doing here?
How did they get here?

It was incredibly disorienting to see them, to imagine them crossing the threshold of the walkway to get to the guesthouse, then to my room, because I had lived the whole summer thinking it was impossible to cross domains. Now here they were, and they could see my room, my kitchen, my things, as we existed together in an unsettling intimacy.

어 되게 어색하네 was all I could say, feeling a sense of closeness in our newfound Korean, but also a distance, removed from myself in the coming together of this upside down, inside out, bottoming out of a scene expected.

How did they figure out which room I was in?
How did they excuse themselves from the morning calisthenics?
But I did not know how to ask.

They carried my things and we walked down the hall and down the stairs that I had walked alone all summer. They had been here before. The foyer of the guesthouse was crowded, full of students, dressed neatly as usual. It was damp from the unrelenting rain, and the smell of wet concrete and the energetic hum of voices overwhelmed everything.

We shook hands goodbye.

I regret not taking one last photo with them, but had to retreat to the bus because everything broke open in that passage.

REFUSAL

On the bus ride to the airport, one of the Foreign Affairs officers began handing back our passports. Looking very serious, he glanced over to tell me that he had lost mine. Sorry, you won't be able to go back, Lisa. I knew his sense of humor by now.

At the airport, right before the security line, where the uncertainty of whether or not I would ever come back always becomes overwhelmingly intense, he reached out his arm to give me my passport. He refused to look me in the eye, though I desperately wanted to bring things to some conclusion, to tell him that I'll be back next year to buy him the refrigerator I promised in exchange for the beer.

But "you" as a meeting point of an "us" is perhaps a refusal of bringing things to a predetermined end. The world, the relations, the friendships made manifest by the public secret can only exist because without you, there is no us. This other secret unlike the secret that must be exposed, is located in things at once much more grounded and much more fleeting, like the immensity left open in parting without ever saying goodbye.


김정일애국주의를 높이 들고 내 나라 내 조국을
더욱 부강하게 하자!

CHAPTER 3 /
MARX–ENGELS–LENIN–STALIN–KIM–KIM–KIM

ABSENT PRESENCE

In the months following Dear Leader Kim Jong Il's death in the winter of 2011, there were some notable changes in the north Korean political iconography. There was a shift in the mood. Stern faces turned to smiling faces in the ever-present portraits of Great Leader comrade Kim Il Sung and Dear Leader comrade Kim Jong Il, and dark communist tunics were swapped for military uniforms, western style suits, and casual khakis. Then there was a doubling, the one Leader made two. The towering statues of Great Leader Kim Il Sung were soon accompanied by statues of Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, and like the portraits, the Leaders now beamed with toothy grins. Great Leader was clad in a suit and overcoat, Dear Leader in his humble statement parka.[1] Political badges were newly issued too, with both Leaders gracing the red banner of revolution, marking the heart of the People, joining them in eternal co-presence with the Leaders. These shifts were replicated throughout the country.

In the context of these transformations, one very curious change was the sudden disappearance of Marx and Lenin from Kim Il Sung Square.

Why now, the split with Marx and Lenin?

NK News, a popular platform for north Korea analysis, reported that "[j]ust how long the paintings would remain in the square has been a subject of speculation for years" and "[i]t is unclear why now they are no longer appropriate."[2] Historian Andrei Lankov asserted that it was a "purge," an "ideological shift to an indigenous and 'perfectly' Korean ideology."[3] But as any reader of Juche / 주체 could gather, Marx and Lenin were not "purged" in the Soviet sense of eliminating political opposition and redacting from the historical record. Their portraits may be gone, removed from the carefully curated landscape, but the Marxist-Leninist legacy remains, however obscured, however easily disavowed. In fact, this moment of disappearance makes something visible, a certain complex, unanticipated development in the socialist genealogy of political sovereignty.

[1] "The single parka he wore from the days of the "Arduous March" to the last days of his life is vivid evidence of how difficult was the path he had to tread to defend his socialist country…A parka gets thin if worn for a long time and cannot keep out the cold. Though the icy wind penetrated the old parka, his heart still burned with a sense of responsibility for defending his country." See Kim Jong Un, *Towards Final Victory* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 2013), 129.
[2] See http://www.nknews.org/2012/10/kim-il-sung-square-gets-a-new-look-2/ (accessed October 2015).
[3] See http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Korea/NK02Dg01.html (accessed October 2015).

JUCHE

"It is problematic not to learn the truth of Marxism-Leninism, but to blindly to reproduce its form," Kim Il Sung asserted in his 1955 speech to Party propagandists, "On Eliminating Dogmatism and Formalism and Establishing Juche in Ideological Work."[4] In all of his writings on Juche, there is repeated emphasis on the importance of embodying the revolutionary truth, the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism.

In his 1982 treatise *On the Juche Idea*, Kim Jong Il describes his father Kim Il Sung as a Leader "well versed in Marxism-Leninism," but cautions against dogmatic applications of this ideological ground to the Korean revolution which is unique and specific.[5] Although Juche is defined against the grain of Marxism-Leninism, Juche is still very much positioned in intimate relation to it. Juche is an idea, an ideology, a philosophy, a central tenet put forth by Great Leader Kim Il Sung that builds on "the revolutionary struggle waged under the banner of Marxism-Leninism," that embodies "the ideological and theoretical achievements of Marxism-Leninism," but that creatively, consciously, and independently adapts it to a new time, a new historical context.[6] Juche is thus the fundamental means by which revolutionary practice can be retooled, rearticulated, reinvigorated.

Like Lenin before him, who creatively adapted Marxism for the Bolshevik cause, who founded the doctrine of Marxism-Leninism, Kim Il Sung is also said to have creatively adapted Marxism-Leninism for the Korean revolution, in which Juche is the central principle of Kimilsungism.[7] This moment is hailed as the origin point of a new "revolutionary line" of socialism.[8]

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[4] My translation from the Korean "맑스-레닌주의진리를 배우지 않고 남의 형식만 따르는것은 백해무익합니다" in 김일성, "사상사업에서 교조주의와 형식주의를 퇴치하고 주체를 확립할데 대하여," in 주체사상에 대하여 (평양: 조선로동당출판사, 1977), 156. The English version can be found here: https://www.marxists.org/archive/kim-il-sung/1955/12/28.htm

[5] I am reading from the English translation and Korean original. See *On the Juche Idea* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1982), 7; 김정일, 주체철학에 대하여 (조선로동당출판사, 2000).

[6] Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea of Our Party* (Pyongyang: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1985), 10–12. Creativity, ideological consciousness, and independence are core tenets of Juche that are reiterated across texts. Chajusong/자주성, a "new philosophical conception of man" that defines "creativity and consciousness as the essential features of man, the social being" and Songun politics/선군정치 all rely on the "creative method" of

[7] This development is outlined by Kim Jong Il in 1983 in a "Treatise Published on the 165th Anniversary of the Birth of Karl Marx and the Centenary of His Death" titled "Let Us Advance Under the Banner of Marxism-Leninism and the Juche Idea." Though it also appears in many other writings on Juche, the alignment of Juche alongside the international communist movement seems particularly well articulated here. See Kim Jong Il, 111–39.

[8] The emergence of Juche is dated to 1930. See Kim Jong Il, *On the Juche Idea*, 8.

THE EMPTY SPACE

With each political succession from one Kim to the next, there has been speculation of regime collapse followed by a growing perplexity in the face of this ultra-resilient sovereign perpetuity, "a political transition that no other former or existing socialist polities have been able to accomplish."[9] To make sense this political system (apparently maintained against all odds), scholars have applied such notions as "theatre state," where the People are held captive by ritual and spectacle, "legacy politics," a fusion of Weberian charismatic authority with the Confucian hereditary tradition whereby a state foresees and overcomes its inevitable demise through the hereditary routinization of charisma, or a kind of monstrous, inexplicable return to monarchical absolutism with the embalming of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il.[10] What these frameworks overlook, however, in hyper focusing on discrete categories and the visible dimension of power, is the paradox that undergirds all modern polities, capitalist and socialist alike, the "empty space" that haunts the democratic experience.[11] "The political," as Claude Lefort says, is revealed in "the double movement whereby the mode of institution of society appears and is obscured."[12]

In a democracy, power is said to rest in "the sovereignty of the people," the "dictatorship of the proletariat," where the People's will is expressed through legislative bodies, elected representatives, an executive, the Party, a Leader. Though the Leader is a highly visible entity, a representation in flesh and in image of the sovereign power of the People, the People are "never visible as such" and must be imagined, evoked, made manifest as a collective entity.[13] It is with the French Revolution and the rise of democratic movements that Lefort locates this disincorporation of the People, where the space once occupied by the king was emptied of its symbolic power, where the "corporeality of the social was dissolved."[14] So power is no longer "linked to a body," and this disincorporation of the body politic he calls a "mutation."[15]

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[9] For Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, the north Korea case is an exception in the way the state "came to defy the stream of global postsocialist transition." See *North Korea*, 49. For Charles Armstrong, the establishment of the "first Socialist family state" is described in terms of success. See "Socialism, Sovereignty, and the North Korean Exception," in *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding* (Lexington Books, 2009), 47; "Familism, Socialism and Political Religion in North Korea," *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 6, no. 3 (2005): 383–94.

[10] Heonik Kwon, "North Korea's New Legacy Politics," E-International Relations, May 16, 2013, http://www.e-ir.info/2013/05/16/north-koreas-new-legacy-politics/; Kim, *Illusive Utopia*; Bruce Cummings, "North Korea's Dynastic Succession," *Le Monde Diplomatique - English Edition*, February 7, 2012, http://mondediplo.com/2012/02/07korea; Armstrong, "Socialism, Sovereignty, and the North Korean Exception."

[11] Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, 279, 303; *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 17, 225.

[12] For Lefort, this is a call for reinterpreting the political in asking after the nature of its form, and not merely as an objectification of its form in *Democracy and Political Theory*, 10–12.

[13] "The sovereignty of the people…is much more complicated, one might say more fictional fiction than the divine right of kings. A king, however dubious his divinity might seem, did not have to be imagined…The people, on the other hand, are never visible as such. Before we ascribe sovereignty to the people, we have to imagine that there is such a thing, something to personify as though it were a single body, capable of thinking, of acting, of making decisions and carrying them out…" See Jason Frank's chapter in reference to Edmund Morgan (1989) who he cites at length in "Living Image of the People," 125."

[14] Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, 303. He is drawing from the well-known work by Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Mediaeval Political Theology* (Princeton University Press, 1997).

[15] Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, 303.

> Power appears as an empty place and those who exercise it as mere mortals who occupy it only temporarily or who could install themselves in it only by force or cunning. There is no law that can be fixed, whose articles cannot be contested, whose foundations are not susceptible of being called into question. Lastly, there is no representation of a centre and of the contours of society…Democracy inaugurates the experience of an ungraspable, uncontrollable society in which the people will be said to be sovereign, of course, but whose identity will constantly be open to question, whose identity will remain latent.[16]

Thus the fundamental paradox of democracy is that "power emanates from the people" yet it is "the power of nobody," which makes it fundamentally unstable, indeterminate, and therefore always "susceptible of being determined."[17] It is here, within a representational conundrum, that another reading of "totalitarianism" might be located, not as the opposite of democracy but as its eclipsing, "a response to the questions raised by democracy…an attempt to resolve its paradoxes" that works to "banish the indetermination that haunts the democratic experience."[18] Totalitarianism and democracy, in other words, are intimately linked in their seeming distance.

What is the nature and substance of this symbolic empty space that undergirds the logic of popular sovereignty? In Ernst Kantorowicz's well known study of the "King's Two Bodies," we learn of the union between a mortal body, the body natural, the biological body of the king that coincides temporarily with an immortal body, the body politic. It is through this unity that a king reigns and that kingship is transferred, not only spatially (the body natural as the material representation of the body politic) but also temporally (the continuity of the body politic as it is conveyed from one body natural to another).[19] Kantorowicz points to the mystical nature of the body politic: "Not only is the body politic 'more ample and large' than the body natural, but there dwell in the former certain truly mysterious forces which reduce, or even remove, the imperfections of the fragile human nature."[20] After the fall of the *ancien régime*, the remains of this transcendent, immaterial, immutable "superbody" continues to trouble modern democratic societies.[21]

Thus the remains of this sublime body, the excesses and immanence of the collective flesh no longer cohered in a body natural, is both the fundamental problem of popular sovereignty and its unbridled potential.[22] For Jason Frank, this is an aesthetic dilemma, a grappling with the question

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[16] Lefort, 303–4.
[17] Lefort, 304.
[18] Lefort, 305.
[19] "The migration of the "Soul," that is, of the immortal part of kingship, from one incarnation to another as expressed by the concept of the king's demise is certainly one of the essentials of the whole theory of the King's Two Bodies," Kantorowicz says. See *The King's Two Bodies*, 13.
[20] Kantorowicz, 9.
[21] I stress "super" as in superhuman, as in contact with the domain of magic, miracles, angels, alchemy. See Kantorowicz, 13. And as Eric Santner writes, "the complex symbolic structures and dynamics of sovereignty described by Kantorowicz…do not simply disappear from the space of politics once the body of the king is no longer available as the primary incarnation of the principle and functions of sovereignty." They instead "migrate," playing out as the "flesh" of the People, wherein popular sovereignty is unbearably always already divided into the People's Two Bodies. See *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (University of Chicago Press, 2011), 33.

[22] Eric Santner and William Mazzarella both work through Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh to point to ways in which it might be harnessed for reimagining politics and the social. Santner approaches from the question of biopolitics and Mazzarella from the problem that populism poses to liberalism. See Santner, *The Royal Remains*;

of how to represent this anonymous, impersonal, collective as the new embodiment of sovereignty.[23] How to harness this transcendent, immutable power no longer bounded by one body but distributed among a multitude? Following Frank's notion of "the living image of the people" is instructive in making sense of how this flesh takes shape, however brief, however emergent in "collective assemblies, crowds, and mass protests," and how it is imagined as "living incarnations of the people's authority, sublime expressions of the vitality and significance of popular will."[24]

Juche is one such response to the aesthetic dilemma of popular sovereignty. So instead of pathologizing Juche as a weird, incomprehensible ideology, an inevitable outcome of "totalitarianism" or the "cult of personality," a "sham doctrine" as B.R. Myers has called it, all of which are analyses that read Juche too literally, too rationally, and too distantly, I attempt a more intimate engagement against the grain to examine the symbolic work it does in relation to this empty space of power.[25] In other words, I look to the absent present form of the empty space and its relation to the universal truth of Marxism-Leninism, on which the legitimacy of the Kimilsungist polity was built, until of course, Marx and Lenin were no longer needed.

This space left vacant by Marx and Lenin is key to making sense of the changes in the north Korean iconography, the doubling, the shift in the atmospherics and feel of the political, and to understanding how Marxism-Leninism enables Kimilsungism enables Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism, and indeed charts the course to a different rendering of political sovereignty.

William Mazzarella, "The Anthropology of Populism: Beyond the Liberal Settlement," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 48 (October 2019): 45–60.

[23] Frank, "Living Image of the People."

[24] Frank, 125.

[25] Juche is frequently translated as "self-reliance," presented as self-evident, which is the hyper focused view I try to move away from. I am less interested in the question of how Marxist-Leninist Juche actually is, and instead attempt to follow its symbolic and material evolution. B.R. Myers critiques Western academic writings on Juche as "a license to relax standards of logic, textual corroboration and accuracy that are enforced elsewhere as a matter of course," which is to say that he finds problematic the way it is read too literally as the "guiding ideology" of north Korea. Where I part ways with Myers is that I see Juche not as a "sham," an empty doctrine with no meaning, but rather as a productive arena of absent presence. See B. R. Myers, *The Cleanest Race: How North Koreans See Themselves and Why It Matters* (Melville House, 2011), 12; "Western Academia and the Word Juche," *Pacific Affairs* 87, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 781; *North Korea's Juche Myth* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015); Grace Lee, "The Political Philosophy of Juche," *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 3, no. 1 (2003): 111.

POLITICAL AESTHETICS

To reinhabit the question of form, aesthetics, and affect, Frank turns to Anatoly Lunacharsky's writings in the wake of the Russian Revolution: "in order for the masses to make themselves felt, they must outwardly manifest themselves, and this is possible only when, to use Robespierre's phrase, they are their own spectacle."[26] Frank also stresses the wide resonance of this "vitalizing power of popular self-regard" and "power through assembly" among the "radical republicans, democrats, and socialists in the Age of Democratic Revolutions."[27] But alongside the significance given to this emergent, effervescent "living image" in conjuring the political, there was also tension with "revolutionary iconoclasm." Could a representation, in fact, ever convey or contain the popular will of the People? And at the risk of the People becoming reification or yet another icon of power? The problem was one of distancing the newly figured political from the iconography of the king.

Frank suggests that with the emergence of fascism, Stalinism, and the "personality cults" that characterized much of the 20th century, the historical narrative decidedly turns toward a "democratic disenchantment."[28] This leads to a certain anxiety about the dangers of appropriating aesthetics in the political realm, a disavowal of the "mystifying pomp and ritualized authority" of monarchy, seeking instead to "transform subjects bedazzled by the spectacles of power into free and equal ratio-critical citizens capable of deliberating over political power's proper exercise and extent."[29] These instances of power gone wrong, conjuring images of state spectacle, of Leaders ruling over the masses, become reason to detach politics from aesthetics and art, and to subsequently disregard the kind of intimacy that "matters forth" in harnessing the excess immanent to the collective flesh of the People.[30] This disavowal and the fact of its impossibility, it seems, is what continues to spill over and erupt into contemporary politics.

This move to distance aesthetics is an "institutional wedge" that walls off the stuff of the mystical in politics, as Haiyan Lee points to in her essay *Mao's Two Bodies*.[31] She examines the phenomenon of Mao impersonation in China, a context where Mao exists as a figure between "political ritual and mass entertainment," between the domain of secular market politics and the politico-mystical-theological.[32] Unlike the impersonation of political figures in the West, where politics has "decidedly moved out of the ritual domain and consequently lost its magical,

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[26] Frank, "Living Image of the People," 126–27.
[27] Frank, 127.
[28] Frank, 128.
[29] Frank, 127–28.
[30] Mazzarella calls this "the mattering forth of the collective flesh." He argues that liberalism did not just carve up the world into liberal and nonliberal zones; more subtly, it also effaced the presencing of the people that, within the republican tradition, had always intimated the possibility of revolution. Liberalism oscillates between an (anxious) invocation and a (scornful) abjection of the affective and corporeal substance of social life." See "The Anthropology of Populism: Beyond the Liberal Settlement," 49.
[31] Haiyan Lee, "Mao's Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman," in *Red Legacies in China: Cultural Afterlives of the Communist Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 263. I thank Christian Sorace for pointing me to this text.
[32] Lee, 256.

incantatory power," Mao still remains attached to the sacred and sublime.[33] Lee explains that because of the empty place of power at the center of liberal democracy, impersonation, political satire, and parody, in theory, "should not undermine the sacrality of the polity or its constitutional principles."[34] Which also perhaps explains why it is "constitutionally protected under the principle of freedom of speech."[35] The impersonation of Mao, however, is still inextricably tied to Mao, "liberator of the downtrodden," Mao, "the sacred symbol" of the Chinese body politic, Mao, the trascendant representation of Maoism lying in the Mausoleum.[36]

As Lefort says, "[t]he party does not appear as distinct from the people or from the proletariat…[i]t does not have a specific reality *within* society. The party *is* the proletariat in the sense that it is identical with it. At the same time, it is the guide or, as Lenin put it, the consciousness of the proletariat."[37] Mao as the founding figure of the Chinese Communist Party, the vanguard Leader, the "helmsman" as Lee refers to him, thus merges in perfect identification with the People. Mao is a "condensation" that effaces the gdistance between the empty space of power and the People. This political formation is particular to the socialist sphere, where the People as sovereign was imagined not through an empty space, but as a force to be harnessed and activated through a vanguard Party and a Leader at its helm.[38] This is what Christian Sorace would call "intimate governance," in which "political leaders and ordinary people would be intimately connected in a relation of physical proximity and perpetual contact."[39]

For Lefort, of course, the empty place of power must remain contested, never fully representable, otherwise it would risk total identification, totalitarianism according to his symbolic paradigm. On the other hand, "intimate governance" presents a radically different logic and potentiality of power, one that can incarnate magic, the miraculous, that circumscribes and channels the excesses and immanence of the collective flesh, the "popular yearning for the sacred and the sublime."[40] Put a different way, in the socialist configuration of mass democracy, the "People" were never imagined as an open, emergent, living, category of "unbounded sensuous potential" or "surplus of immanence" but rather always figured in intimate relation to the Leader.[41]

[33] Lee, 263.
[34] Lee, 263.
[35] Lee, 263.
[36] Lee, 247.
[37] Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism.*, 298–99.
[38] The use of the term avant-garde in the realm of both politics and art can be traced to Henri de Saint-Simon. See Donald D. Egbert, "The Idea of 'Avant-Garde' in Art and Politics," *The American Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (1967): 339–66.
[39] Christian Sorace, "Metrics of Exceptionality, Simulated Intimacy," *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 3 (2020): 555.
[40] Lee, "Mao's Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman," 256, 263.
[41] Jason Frank, "The Living Image of the People," *Theory & Event* 18, no. 1 (2015); "Living Image of the People."

LENINISM

Perhaps the most powerful dimension of "intimate governance" is the body itself, the body of the Leader as pure representation of the People as well as the body of the People that feels.

Alexei Yurchak's writings on Leninism point to a uniquely communist model of sovereign perpetuity that is intimately linked to the bodies of Lenin.[42] Like the King's Two Bodies, Lenin's body is at once singular and multiple. The body in the mausoleum is both the body natural of Lenin the biological, mortal person, but also the body mystical body of Leninism, the immortal doctrine of Soviet socialism. Unlike the bodies of the king, however, the immortal body of Leninism coincides not with Lenin the person, but with the empty space of power, constructed and continuously shaped by the Party as the "foundational Truth" of the Soviet political system. Leninism, therefore was a structure that gave body, form, and legitimacy to the body politic.

In the art of body preservation that Yurchak describes, one of the "Lenin Lab" scientists describes Lenin as a "living sculpture."[43] On the one hand, the external form of Lenin was meticulously maintained to appear as a fixed representation of the eternal legitimacy of Leninism. On the other, the content inside Lenin's body, such as embalming fluids and other inorganic substances, were continuously added and adjusted, just as Lenin's ideas were continuously shaped and reconstituted to fit the circumstances of the time. In practice, this meant that every leader from Stalin to Gorbachev, as General Secretary of the Party and arbiter of the ideologically correct path to communism "produced his own version of Leninism."[44] The doctrine of Leninism therefore cannot be understood as "a personal creation of Lenin, and the body in the mausoleum is not just his personal body. Both are complex productions of many people and a long history."[45] Like Kantorowicz's superbody and the modern equivalent of Lefort's empty place, Leninism became "the political system's foundational truth…located outside of and prior to the system, legitimizing it from that external place."[46] Within this framework, Stalinism, Maoism, Kimilsungism are polities that were built on the empty place eclipsed by Leninism to create the sacred ground of its own legitimacy.

"Isn't the image form without matter?" Blanchot asks.[47] The Kims, like Lenin, are "living sculptures," mortal bodies made immortal in its own image, no longer absent presence but an ever-present too full presence, an eternal presence imaging political sovereignty.

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[42] Yurchak, "Bodies of Lenin."
[43] Yurchak, 128.
[44] Yurchak, 122.
[45] Yurchak, 148.
[46] Yurchak, 132.
[47] Maurice Blanchot, "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," in *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 256.

KIM-KIM-KIM

Similar to Yurchak's analysis of the Soviet system of political sovereignty heralded in the name of the "Truth" of Leninism, the emergence of the Kimilsungism under the banner of *Juche* was effectively enabled by this "creative application" of the already sacred "universal truth" of Marxism-Leninism, connecting one system of Truth to another. By the early 1970s Kim Il Sung established "an absolutist political system," appointing himself to the office of president, enabling him to transcend the power of the Party.[48] In this way, Kim Il Sung became the sole arbiter of the revolutionary philosophy of Juche. The Great Leader had indeed become "Great" – what Sonia Ryang describes as an "untouchable, yet ubiquitous" form of existence.[49]

After Great Leader Kim Il Sung's death in 1994, amidst the turmoil of flood and famine, and the days of socialist solidarity long past, north Korea watchers anticipated the collapse of the state. Much to their surprise, the system survived, and Kim Jong Il succeeded his father in what appears as a typical dynastic transfer of power. What troubles this surface reading, however, is that Kim Jong Il did not take the Great Leader's place as the next president. Kim Il Sung was declared the "eternal State President" and his embalmed body was placed in his presidential office, what is now the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. After a three-year mourning period, Dear Leader Kim Jong Il officially took leadership as the General Secretary of the Party and Chairman of the National Defense Commission. This marked the era of the new Kim, a new body natural to reign over the body mystical already secured by Kimilsungism. The locus of what Yurchak calls "communist sovereignty" therefore lies within the twinned bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kimilsungism, joined with the next Kim, Leader of the Korean Worker's Party, guardian of the sacred doctrine, and successor of the Korean Revolution.

After Dear Leader Kim Jong Il's death in 2011, north Korea watchers again anticipated system collapse, but the polity persisted. Kim Jong Un succeeded his father and grandfather, and now Dear Leader, like Great Leader, was preserved and placed in the Kumsusan Palace of the Sun. The "hidden science of communist sovereignty" that preserved the "dynamic form" of Lenin's body emerged within a new symbolic system, instantiated this time in the double bodies of Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, in the fusion of their immortal mystical bodies secured in the political doctrine expanded now to Kimilsungism-Kimjongilism.[50] Kim Jong Un the third Supreme Leader is therefore not the sovereign Leader singular, but the body natural within a layered locus of power, each Kim building upon the previous Kim. His legitimacy is secured by the growing body mystical, the expanding flesh of the superbody, what has become the sovereign Kim-Kim-

[48] Suh, *Kim Il Sung*, 267; Heonik Kwon and Byung-Ho Chung, *North Korea: Beyond Charismatic Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 51; Lankov, *North of the DMZ*, 10. Scholars such as James Person of the North Korea International Documentation Project at the Wilson Center would trace the monolithic ideological system to as early as 1967: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-1967-purge-the-gapsan-faction-and-establishment-the-monolithic-ideological-system (accessed April 2016).
[49] Sonia Ryang, *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Harvard University Asia Center, 2012), 17.
[50] Yurchak, "Bodies of Lenin." Also see the essay by Rüdiger Frank "Domestic Politics, the Economy and Social Issues" (page 45) in the Korea Yearbook 2013 Rüdiger Frank et al., eds., *Korea 2013: Politics, Economy and Society*, Korea Yearbook 7 (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2013).

Kim.[51] In this configuration, elements of an absolutist theological order combines with communist sovereignty to create another political form unique to North Korea, one that can potentially reproduce itself infinitely ad hoc.

Ryang remarks that once north Korea openly distanced itself from Marxism-Leninism as its ideological foundation, "it became much easier for the world to denounce it as inhumane, weird, and above all, totalitarian. In the center of this, the world finds its sacred treatment of Kim Il Sung as the strangest and most anti-democratic element."[52] Yet the question of the People still remains, as does the logic nascent to this resilient system of political sovereignty. Who will be the next body mortal of the Kim-Kim-Kim polity? No one knows. What is clear is that Marx and Lenin are no longer needed.

As Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un has said: "Our socialism is independent socialism," "Our socialism is invincible socialism in which the leader, the Party, and the masses are united with a single heart."[53]

[51] Charles Armstrong would call this "ultrasovereignty." He touches on the double body of the Kims in dialogue with Kantorowicz, but his analysis focuses primarily on the concept "the king never dies." See his chapter "Socialism, Sovereignty, and the North Korean Exception," 41, 46–47.
[52] *Reading North Korea*, 2012, 200.
[53] Kim Jong Un, *Towards Final Victory*, 66.

IMAGE OF THE LEADER

The connection between image, life, and death has been a philosophical question of concern for thinkers such as Maurice Blanchot, Louis Marin, Jacques Derrida, Roland Barthes, and Walter Benjamin. Each illuminate the paradox of absent presence, the force of *re*-presentation, the notion of supplement, the sense of "*that-has-been*." Death is intrinsic to the image because it is the greatest of all absence. As Belting notes, "the image conveys a contradiction between presence and absence, and that contradiction has its roots in the human experience of death."[54] With this he prompts a careful examination of the way images of people, refracted in the medium of tombstones, portraits, and other artifacts, serve as mementos and monuments to the memory of the dead. A corpse is an ideal medium unlike any other as it is its own image.[55] In funerary practices where the body is buried or cremated after death, the body remains tied to the domain of life and the corpse becomes a temporary image of the body, bringing forth the absent presence of the body until it is transferred to the domain of death. In the communist tradition of preserving the body of Leaders, the body of the Leader and the "living image of the People" coincide, producing an aura of eternal presence, a preservation of form in the sovereign image while the content is endlessly subject to scientific treatments to prevent the decay of the body.

The sheer ubiquity of Leader images in north Korea appears contradictory to the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty, hence north Korea's persistent characterization as a "cult." In the case of Stalin too, his images proliferated to such an extent that they came to represent an excess of power generally associated with the terms like "totalitarianism" and "cult of personality." And though Stalin's iconographic coupling to Lenin has been taken up by historians, the analysis has largely attended to visuality and semiotics, obscuring the symbolic dimension of political power within Leninism that activates the image of the Leader differently.[56]

Portraits do things. They hold or rather lend form to a tremendous, mysterious power, slipping out of the grasp of even the Leader himself. Take for instance this anecdote:

> Artyom Sergeev, Stalin's adopted son, recalled a fight between Stalin and his biological son Vasily. After he found out that Vasily had used his famous last name to escape punishment for one of his drunken debauches, Stalin screamed at him. "'But I'm a Stalin too,' retorted Vasily. 'No, you're not,' said Stalin. 'You're not Stalin and I'm not Stalin. Stalin is Soviet power. Stalin is what he is in the newspapers and the portraits, not you, not even me!'" [57]

For Jan Plamper, who writes on the production of Stalin's "cult," the portrait primarily stands in as historical evidence of the cult as a "cult product" to be studied in the art of cult production. By reconceptualizing the portrait as a conduit for a relation, however, the "cult of personality" can become decoupled from the person and become instead a form through which the Leader-People

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[54] Hans Belting, *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Princeton University Press, 2011), 84.
[55] In reference to Blanchot, see Belting, 85.
[56] Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (Yale University Press, 2012); "The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult," in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (University of Washington Press, 2003), 19–50; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (University of California Press, 1999).
[57] As quoted in Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, xiii.

relation is staged. As Lee describes with regard to Mao's cult images, they were not "mere representations" but rather "something on the order of divine iconography possessing magical potency and commanding homage."[58]

> [T]he woman who faints on seeing Stalin, a writer deemed an anti-Stalinist who works himself into a state of ecstasy on coming close to Stalin's physical body, a future dissident who suffers nightmares about Stalin being poisoned, victims of Stalin's violent policies who dies of heart attack on hearing of Stalin's death.[59]

"What really went on between ruler and ruled?" Plamper asks.[60] Soviet historiography has generally focused on the former to answer this question. It is worth noting that the Kim-Kim-Kim polity actively disassociates itself from personality cults, just as the Soviet Union officially condemned them.[61] To move away from implicating the "cult" as a pathological political form, then, we need better tools, perhaps a new language that can encompass the symbolic efficacy of these images.

[58] Lee, "Mao's Two Bodies: On the Curious (Political) Art of Impersonating the Great Helmsman," 247.
[59] Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, xx.
[60] Plamper, xx.
[61] Ken Jowitt, *New World Disorder: The Leninist Extinction* (University of California Press, 1992); Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*.

IMAGE OF THE PEOPLE

> July 1994
>
> Great Leader Kim Il Sung's funeral procession is led by a large portrait framed with white flowers. It is followed by the casket of the leader wrapped in a red socialist banner bearing the insignia of the Korean Worker's Party. Masses of people line the streets, expressing colossal grief, mourning the death of the Leader.
>
> December 2011
>
> Dear Leader Kim Jong Il's funeral procession is led by a large portrait framed with white flowers. It is followed by the casket of the leader wrapped in a red socialist banner bearing the insignia of the Korean Worker's Party. Masses of people line the snowy streets, expressing colossal grief, mourning the death of the Leader.

"Much was made in Western news media of the mourning's corporeal intensity. Mourners seemed to be losing control, racked, collapsing on the streets and in the offices of the capital, Pyongyang, in a manner that one journalist described as 'both moving and incredibly unnerving to witness.' This was, by one account, 'wild-eyed, shaking grief…scenes of near-chaos: sobbing, tearing at hair, gulping for breath' and—again—"convulsing.'"[62]

With what set of orientations do we understand a loss so monumental that it produces such excess, such intense expressions of sorrow? The Western media response to the scene of the funeral was really invested in one question: Are the tears real? In any other instance of loss, a question like this would seem inappropriate, but there was something out of this world about these crying masses that prompted the question over and over and over again. Something did not add up. How could these people cry for a Leader who oppressed them, and so viscerally at that? Were they really crying or were the faking it?

Mazzarella approaches the conundrum through the question of sincerity posed by "the liberal imagination," which he describes as "a set of assumptions about human nature and its relation to public life that…provide a basic matrix for mainstream political discourse, on both the left and right, in liberal democracies."[63] The north Korean tears presented an impasse to this imagination, they were illegible to its ideals of freedom, rights, and justice, conjuring the ultimate nightmare of scenario of politics. Weaving this through an expanded understanding of the portrait image of the "cult" might offer an outside to the real/staged binary.

[62] Mazzarella, "Totalitarian Tears," 91–92.
[63] Mazzarella, 92.

In the late 1920s eclipse of the Soviet avant-garde with the heralding of socialist realism, the "enthronement and redefinition of the portrait genre" became the "precondition for the surge of leader portrait painting."[64] Plamper draws from art historian Matthew Cullerne Bown for insight into these debates. The "social portrait" as described by Lunacharsky, should express "in a particular face, in a particular individual… a whole layer of society."[65] In other words, the "social portrait" was a portrayal of a Leader, a hero of Socialist Labor, a film star, a protagonist in a novel that could portray "the People," or more specifically, the ideal traits of the "New Soviet Man" or "Person of a Juche Type." Stalin's portrait too was theorized as a social portrait, and portraits of Lenin, the first of which Bown locates in the year 1918, might be imagined, at least at first, as the visualization of Lenin's Party that mirrored his qualities and vision, what Ken Jowitt calls the "conflictual, but effective, amalgam of charismatic impersonalism."[66]

Likewise, the portraits of Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il, and Kim Jong Un are incarnations of "the People." Hoon Song writes that Kim Il Sung is Juche's *representative* of sorts, "not only in the sense of spokesperson, but also in the sense of embodied example."[67] He is exemplary, "an outward manifestation of the supreme human potential (of self-reliance) indwelling in everyone."[68] The portraits also occupy a central position in the landscape of sociopolitical life and various fields of cultural production, engendering metaphors and becoming metaphors themselves, "locked in a loop of mutual signification" not only between Leader and doctrine, Leader and Leader, Leader and People, but within a network of indexical relations across media and between impressions of "Juche," "independence / 자주성," "single-minded unity / 일심단결," and "unification / 통일."[69]

What threads the Kim-Kim-Kim polity to Leninism, Stalinism, and Maoism within the family resemblance of socialist "cults" is this intimate relationship between the Leader and the People. Ryang explains that the intricacies of this relationship become visible in north Korea through the analytic of sovereign love.[70] She explores the concept through the writings of Georges Bataille[71] and Simone Weil[72] woven through a compendium of north Korean literary work. "Weil's contended notion of love is somewhat self-effacing, or rather self-eliminating, the ideal being ultimately moving closer to god," which for Bataille is "ultimate sovereign…in that he does not have to or cannot love humans: God [sovereign] loves only himself. Humans on the other hand must continue to love God [sovereign] forever in order to attain virtue and status akin to that accorded sacred beings."[73] The seemingly one-sided love is counter-intuitively dynamic and self-constituting, albeit in a "roundabout way." Each person is "required to sacrifice oneself in order

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[64] Plamper, "The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult," 24.
[65] Anatoly Lunacharsky was the Commissar of Enlightenment at the height of these debates, 1917-1929. See Plamper, endnote 17; Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power*, 192.
[66] See Bown in *Socialist Realist Painting* (Yale University Press, 1998), 56. Also Jowitt in *New World Disorder*, 11.
[67] Hoon Song, "North Korea's 'Succession' of Marxism," *Boundary 2* 43, no. 3 (August 1, 2016): 86.
[68] Song, 89.
[69] Plamper, "The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult," 24.
[70] *Reading North Korea: An Ethnological Inquiry* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Asia Center, 2012); "Biopolitics or the Logic of Sovereign Love--Love's Whereabouts in North Korea," in *North Korea: Toward a Better Understanding, Ed. Sonia Ryang* (Lexington Books, 2009), 57–84.
[71] *The Accursed Share, Vols. 2 and 3: The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1993).
[72] *Gravity and Grace* (University of Nebraska Press, 1952).
[73] *Reading North Korea*, 2012, 41.

to gain eternal life and join the Eternal President…each individual stands alone, face to face with his own self vis-à-vis the Great Leader."[74] Eternal life is granted through political life, which is tied to devotion and loyalty to the Leader. The political is what enables being itself.

The rhetoric of the People as ultimate arbiters of power is both the basis and fundamental paradox of modern democratic governance founded on the revolutionary principle of popular sovereignty. Understanding the ideological ground of this system and the way it takes shape in different polities across the left-right/east-west continuum is crucial in forging a sense of "[h]ow individuals might come to experience themselves as free and equal parts of a collective entity capable of transformative action."[75] And whether the People cohere in a portrait of the Leader or an anti-Trump rally, each instantiation excretes a surplus of mystical immanence that returns and returns. Is this Benjaminian aura? Or what Plamper calls alchemy?

[74] *Reading North Korea*, 2012, 197.
[75] Frank, "The Living Image of the People."

TACTILITY OF VISION

I look to practices of seeing in traditions beyond the rational ocular centric to further elaborate the encounter with "cult" images. Hindu rituals as well as Korean shamanic and funerary traditions offer some perspective while illuminating the relationality of vision, the sociality of the image, demonstrating an embodied entanglement between portrait image, the body, the senses, and presence.

Christopher Pinney's *The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* works through the idea of "tactility of vision" and the "zone of sensory mutuality" in Indian popular chromolithography.[76] As the title suggests, his work is a reinterpretation of Benjamin's famous essay, and what is at stake is the elucidation of aura embedded in ritual practices precisely in a context of mass reproduction.[77] How is it that divine images "get hold" of and "lock in" devotees? It is a discursive, self-constituting relationship that "needs to be understood in terms of bodily practices that transform pieces of paper into powerful deities through the devotee's gaze, the proximity of his or her heart, and a whole repertoire of performances in front of the image (breaking coconuts, lighting incense sticks, folding hands, shaking small bells, the utterance of mantras, burning camphor)."[78]

Sensory practices and corporeal aesthetics are brought together with the term *corpothetics*, which encompasses the concepts of *baithana*, the practice of installing or "seating" an image, rendering it embodied with divine energy, and *darsan*, a ritual of visuality predicated on "seeing and being seen."[79] This can also be thought of as "a physical relationship of visual intermingling" that provides "visual access to the deity."[80] In this context, images of the divine enter into a life cycle beginning with the seating of the image through *baithana*, its accumulation of potency and affective force over time through *darsan*, and finally the end of its life when the image becomes worn with the traces of time and devotion. Even at the end of its life, the *corpothetic* relation determines the trajectory of the image, and it is placed in the river to ensure that it "never comes into contact with human feet," or placed in water for *paraba, a* "ritual cooling."[81] The images are never just thrown away for they contain life.

Within an overlapping tradition, Diana Eck's work emphasizes the gift and force of *darsan*.[82] The deity can "give" or "take" *darsan*, as it is the deity that "presents itself to be seen in its

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[76] Christopher Pinney, "The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Or, What Happens When Peasants 'Get Hold' of Images," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (University of California Press, 2002), 355.
[77] For a compelling analysis of Walter Benjamin's concept of aura, see Miriam Bratu Hansen's article "Benjamin's Aura" (2008). To note is aura defined as "a medium of perception" – an elusive phenomenal substance, ether, or halo that surrounds a person of object of perception, encapsulating their individuality and authenticity.
[78] "The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Or, What Happens When Peasants 'Get Hold' of Images," in *Media Worlds: Anthropology on New Terrain* (University of California Press, 2002), 364–65.
[79] "The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Or, What Happens When Peasants 'Get Hold' of Images," 2002, 358.
[80] Pinney, 363–64.
[81] Pinney, 365, endnote 4.
[82] *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Columbia University Press, 1998).

image."[83] Eck points to the "prominence of the eyes of Hindu divine images" noting that "contact between the devotee and deity is exchanged through the eyes."[84] Further, "the eyes were the final part of the anthropomorphic image to be carved or set in place," and even today, it is still "common practice in the consecration of images" to ritually open the eyes with "a golden needle" or a "final stroke of a paintbrush."[85] "The gaze which falls from the newly-opened eyes of the deity is said to be so powerful that it must first fall upon some pleasing offering, such as sweets, or upon a mirror where it may see its own reflection. More than once has the tale been told of that powerful gaze falling upon some unwitting bystander, who died instantly of its force."[86] Seeing is a force akin to touch, but also a force so overwhelmingly powerful that it has the power to kill.[87] Pinney's *corpothetics* similarly renders sight as the location of exchange, but the exchange unfolds in its "full use of the senses – seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, and hearing."[88]

In Korean shamanism, god paintings are the "primary material manifestation" of the "bond" between god spirits and *mansin* (shaman), according to Laurel Kendall and Jongsung Yang.[89] With the exception of shamanic dreams and visions, gods who otherwise remain invisible inhabit images, "animate" them in order to engage with the material world. "The painting, then, functions as a medium, a transmitter of divine agency" or the locus of an encounter between gods and *mansin*, as she too is a "costumed body…a medium for the visible and kinetic presence of her gods, a prosthesis enabling the actions of the otherwise invisible entities."[90] The god images and the body of the *mansin* are both spirit mediums, providing the "seat" that houses deities. This is reminiscent of the way Belting imagines the relationship between image, body, and medium.

JeeHey Kim's study of the Korean funerary photo-portrait illuminates another instance of image as "seat."[91] Presenting a counter-epistemology to photography as referentiality, the work charts the significance of the portrait from the moment of death, the separation of the corporeal body and the spirit / 혼백 to the process of mourning and memorialization. "[W]ithin the ritual practices of Korean funerals the photograph is not perceived as a representation of the dead. It connotes neither presence nor absence."[92] Rather, it is an "absent presence" of the absent body and the present spirit. Wreathed with a black band and flowers, the photo-portrait is placed near the body of the dead to function as the seat of the spirit, then as a carrier of the spirit in the funeral procession, until the body is returned to the ground. Only then can the spirit gain new life as an ancestor god.[93] In the tactility of the rituals surrounding the photo-portrait, bowing, offerings, lighting incense, a relation with the invisible corporeality of the spirit world is enacted.

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[83] Eck, 6.
[84] Eck, 6–7.
[85] Eck, *Darśan*.
[86] Eck.
[87] Eck, 9.
[88] Eck, 11.
[89] Laurel Kendall and Jongsung Yang, "What Is an Animated Image? Korean Shaman Paintings as Objects of Ambiguity," *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5, no. 2 (October 20, 2015): 158.
[90] Kendall and Yang, 159, 156.
[91] Jeehey Kim, "Korean Funerary Photo-Portraiture," *Photographies* 2, no. 1 (March 1, 2009): 7–20.
[92] Kim, 9.
[93] Kim, 8–10.

Through these preliminary accounts that destabilize what Pinney calls "disembodied, unidirectional, and disinterested vision," a space might open up to look again at the "cult" image so readily associated with socialist polities.[94]

Is it not the Leader that one sees, but a potentiality, a feeling?

I conclude by responding to a question Haiyan Lee poses about the radical potential of feeling "in the wake of decades of liberal disengagement from substantive questions of sentiments and values."[95] "[I]s politics possible without passion?" she asks.[96] No, I don't think it is. But is it then a question of channeling passions and intensities toward a "negative" politics? To mobilize in such a way that allows the feeling that we so desire without being enclosed by the political?

[94] "The Indian Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction: Or, What Happens When Peasants 'Get Hold' of Images," 2002, 359.
[95] Haiyan Lee, "Class Feeling," in *Afterlives of Chinese Communism*, ed. Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere (Austrailian National University Press and Verso, 2019), 28.
[96] Lee, 28.

CHAPTER 4 /
RED STAGE OR BRINGING THE AUTHORITARIAN STREAK OUT

RED STAGE

August 19, 2015 / Juche Year 104

We are sitting in the grand auditorium of the Ponghwa Art Theater in Pyongyang, anxiously awaiting Laibach's performance. We, from Germany, Russia, Slovenia, Norway, the US, Hong Kong, and France, a group of 17 who traveled to north Korea to witness the event. We, informed only a few hours beforehand that we would be able to attend. Lots of things happen last minute in north Korea, or after much delay. The air is thick with anticipation and the energy heady. This is the Liberation Day concert in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation from Japanese colonialism, but it's also a nod to the staging of another liberation to come.

LAIBACH

To get at the nature and particulars of the "liberation to come," it is crucial to grasp the performative weight of Laibach, who have explored the relationship between art and ideology since their establishment in the Socialist Republic of Slovenia in 1980.[1] The group was formed in the decade prior to the end of Yugoslavia, where they began to stage what Slavoj Žižek calls "an aggressive inconsistent mixture of Stalinism, Nazism, and Blut und Boden ideology."[2] They may appear to be simply appropriating symbols of Stalinism or Nazism in their staging, dress, comportment, and the rhythms of a state anthem or military march, but this experimentation opens something up, the paradox inherent in all forms of democratic sovereignty, so they are "trying to bring this authoritarian streak out, even with a certain open fascination. There is no distance there. They are not making fun of it. They openly enjoy it."[3]

[1] For more on Laibach, NSK, and the political context from which they emerge, see Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK* (MIT Press, 2005); Zdenka Badovinac, Eda Cufer, and Anthony Gardner, eds., *NSK from Kapital to Capital: Neue Slowenische Kunst-an Event of the Final Decade of Yugoslavia* (MIT Press, 2015); Gretchen Bakke, *The Likeness: Semblance and Self in Slovene Society* (University of California Press, 2020).
[2] Slavoj Žižek, "Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists?," *M'ars* 5, no. 3–4 (1993).
[3] See video clip Slavoj Žižek introducing Laibach in North Korea (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZl8ScVYvA and also his discussion of Laibach in the film by Michael Benson, *Predictions of Fire*, 1996. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ypDY1qx0ma4 [18:22-22:43].

RED STAGE

When Laibach's north Korea concert was announced in the summer of 2015, Euro-American news outlets went into a frenzy, reporting the event in generally two ways, pointing either to the group's bizarre, too-close-for-comfort-embrace and appropriation of totalitarian iconography or equating the concert to a PR stunt, an ironic provocation, a parody of the north Korean state, in which the "North Koreans are not in on the joke" as one internet commentator put it.[4] Laibach's concert was framed as either a strange, incomprehensible, naive identification with totalitarianism o*r* a critique of totalitarianism through its ironic imitation, an event to be applauded in the satirical vein of movies such as "The Interview."[5] But which was it? Were they really fascists or really just making fun of fascism? Why would a band with such controversy even be invited to Pyongyang?

It is precisely this ambiguity that makes their performances so compelling. Laibach is at once all of these things, none of these things, and therefore able to stage the beyond of these things. As Žižek reminds us in his writings and comments about the group, Laibach "does not function as an answer, but as a question."[6]

[4] See comment by "alfredooo": https://www.theguardian.com/music/2015/jun/11/laibach-announce-shows-in-north-korea-pyongyang (accessed November 2017)
[5] A 2014 satire film in which a couple of American journalists played by James Franco and Seth Rogen are hired by the CIA to assassinate the leader of north Korea.
[6] Žižek, "Why Are Laibach and NSK Not Fascists?"

SUSPENDING THE KNOWN

The truth, according to Morten Traavik, the artist-collaborator and visionary behind the concert, is that both Laibach and north Korea are misunderstood.[7] His role would therefore be one of a "matchmaker" setting up "the blindest of blind dates."[8] This blind date, however, was much bigger than simply a meeting between a controversial band and a controversial state. What Traavik introduced was an unknown, a momentary blindness that might induce a recalibration of what we think we see and know of the world. Perhaps one of the reasons why Laibach, the "first ever Western rock band to perform in North Korea," seemed so "weird" and "strange" to "experts" and "watchers" comes down to the question of seeing and transgressions around certain expectations of that seeing.

First of all, it was baffling, almost impossible to imagine an edgy, artistic, avant-garde musical performance in a country that appears anything but, so outdated, so "frozen in time." The two somehow could not coexist, the paradox being the clash of free, uninhibited expression in a context that appears completely devoid of it. In the lead up to the concert, for instance, a Washington Post article expressed doubt as to "[w]hether the complexities of Laibach's music and its image will make sense in North Korea."[9] The implication being, would the ideologically indoctrinated citizens of the "Hermit Kingdom" get it? Would they be able to recognize the critique of totalitarianism that was so clearly obvious to the liberal worldview? But was this a one-way critique?

Laibach's stage was not one of sarcasm, ridicule, cynicism, or mimicry, but rather a spectacle of extreme identification or "overidentification," in Žižek's terms, with the symbols and rituals of state ideology that temporarily suspended its "normal functioning."[10] In the context of late socialism in the Soviet Union, Alexei Yurchak explores the conceptual apparatus of this staging through the aesthetics of *stiob*, which he describes as "a grotesque overidentification with the *form* of an authoritative symbol, to the point that it was [is] impossible to tell whether the person supported that symbol or subverted it in a subtle ridicule."[11] The *stiobesqe* reproduction of these authoritative forms, which could be a slogan, a ritual, a gesture, an image, or another formulaic element in socialist iconography, was employed by artists and experimental groups such as Laibach that made it impossible to identify whether their performance was "a form of sincere support, subtle ridicule, or a peculiar mixture of the two."[12]

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[7] See https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/asia/laibach-concert-in-pyongyang-north-korea.html?_r=0 (accessed November 2017)
[8] As quoted from the film by Uģis Olte and Morten Traavik, *Liberation Day*, 2016. that documents the making of Laibach's 2015 concert in Pyongyang. For more information, see http://www.liberationday.film
[9] See article in the Washington Post "The first foreign band to play in North Korea will be a Slovenian art-rock group": https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/07/15/the-first-foreign-band-to-play-in-north-korea-will-be-a-slovenian-art-rock-group/?utm_term=.80bc81ba52ec (accessed December 2017)
[10] Ibid.
[11] See *stiob* in Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 249–50, 252–53. Also Dominic Boyer and Alexei Yurchak, "AMERICAN STIOB: Or, What Late-Socialist Aesthetics of Parody Reveal about Contemporary Political Culture in the West," *Cultural Anthropology* 25, no. 2 (2010): 179–221.
[12] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, 252–53.

The group's distinctive take on the genre of cover songs also troubles the classification of their music as simply proto-totalitarian or subversive imitation. Their conceptual approach draws from all ideological realms: nationalist anthem songs (In the Army Now, Final Countdown), songs from rock groups with cult followings such as the Beatles (Across the Universe), Queen (One Vision), The Rolling Stones (Sympathy for the Devil), and even religiously inflected songs with covers of the Jesus Christ Superstar rock opera. By overidentifying with this musical material, the band amplifies certain dimensions of its message, activating it in new ways through their manipulation of lyrics and sounds, use of imagery and theatrics that work to expose "the totalitarian basis of all mass culture, with its mythology of folk roots and national unity, and its ecstatic mass appeal."[13] Further reinforcing this method of critique, the band's rootedness in an aesthetic tradition that values the copy over the original, inspires their disassociation with terms such as "covers" and "samples," emphasizing instead their work as "new originals" or copies without originals, as Alexei Monroe underscores in his writings on Laibach.[14]

[13] See Alexei Yurchak, "Mimetic Critique of Ideology: Laibach and Avia," *Chtodelat*, 2008. https://chtodelat.org/b8-newspapers/12-51/mimetic-critique-of-ideology-laibach-and-avia/ (accessed November 2017)

[14] The artistic milieu is intimately linked to NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) the New Slovene Art movement that began in the 1980s which includes Laibach as a founding member. See Monroe, especially the section "The Intellectual and Artistic Context of NSK" in *Interrogation Machine*, 36–39, 227.

RED STAGE

For their Pyongyang performance, Laibach's approach was no different, taking inspiration from the 1965 musical film, *The Sound of Music*, which is a well-known film in north Korea.[15] Into this foundation, they intricately imbued Korean socialist, nationalist, and mythical iconography into their own mix of totalitarian and fascist symbolism, then layered these reproductions onto the wholesome aesthetic of the film, all the while subtly generating a sense of an inexplicable something, a dark matter, a void. This was accomplished through various dimensions of their stage presence: the donning of Korean communist suits with a Laibach badge placed over the heart, just as the north Koreans do with their Leader badges, their use of video projections, images, and lighting also brought forth a powerful atmospherics while creating a sense of tension and paradox.

Instead of the majestic, cheerful opening to the film that we remember of the Julie Andrews' classic, the Laibach version induced a melancholy tone, especially with the addition of a chorus subtly sampling the Korean folk song Arirang that is, at its core, about loss. Or in their rendition of Edelweiss, images of "The Flower Girl," the famous opera turned screenplay penned by Great Leader himself, was montaged with other kinds of flowers that suggested a shadowy element to the purity of the flower girl.

A streak of something amiss.

[15] This is especially the case for those with English language training, as the film was used pedagogically in English classes.

MIRROR

Contrary to what the Euro-American media might lead us to believe, all of this was not lost on the Korean partners that Traavik worked with to organize the Liberation Day concert. In fact, north Korea's Committee for Cultural Relations, the host organization for Laibach, had their own very stimulating response to the group's conceptual work and history of provocations. It was expressed in a particularly powerful scene in Morten Traavik and Ugis Olte's documentary film of the same name, "Liberation Day," which follows the collaboration and complex negotiations in the lead up to the big event.

The band had just arrived in Pyongyang. Everyone is together at a welcome reception hosted by the Committee. Mr. Ryu, the Director, with whom Traavik has worked on previous projects, stands to give the following welcome speech:

> Laibach is a terrible rock group, that in its music videos uses pornography. Indeed, this group is considered as Neo-Nazi sporting Hitler-style scenery and clothing, also insulting different religions. This band basically laughs and jokes about what they call dictatorships around the world, and their music is terrible. They have been banned in Russia for a reason, that they make fun of the national anthem of Russia. And it is inconceivable that the DPRK, a staunchly anti-fascist state, which fought against Japanese imperialism, that was an ally of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy, would invite a group such as Laibach to Pyongyang. How can fascist people be invited for the celebration of the 70th anniversary of Korea's liberation? If Laibach would visit the DPRK, they would carry out a provocation and harm its socialist system.
>
> …So, without trust, without confidence, we cannot invite you here.[16]

A dense, menacing silence follows the speech. Everything is suspended. Everyone is still. It momentarily seems that nothing is certain, boundaries are collapsing, and even Laibach are susceptible to the refractions in the mirror of their own performative function. Then the film cuts to Traavik: "I think everybody were [sic] experiencing a very peculiar mix of relief, because we don't have to pretend anymore, and fear, like, what will happen now."[17]

The fundamental method employed by Laibach is to operate in flux. As art critic Jacob Lillemose points out, the "effectiveness of their use of double entendres," is that they become "a mirror for the audience's own thoughts and feelings, projections and interpretations."[18] Sometimes the mirror returns a simple reflection, but it can also be fractured, broken, prismatic. Or drawing from Michel Foucault's reading of the mirror in Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, it is not the visible that the mirror reflects, but that which "resides outside all view."[19] In this sense, the response elicits the ideological frame in which it is located.

Traavik explains that his partners had "taken all these tabloid headlines from the world media…about Laibach's concert" and that Mr. Ryu had "mixed it together seamlessly with all of the negative protests in his own organization, in the north Korean side, and yet made it into one

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[16] As transcribed from the film "Liberation Day"(2017) [18:07-20:48]
[17] Ibid.
[18] See Jacob Lillemose, "More Fascist than Fascism," *Eurozine*, January 9, 2007. http://www.eurozine.com/more-fascist-than-fascism/ (accessed November 2017)
[19] Michel Foucault, "Las Meninas," in *The Order of Things* (Vintage Books, 1994), 8.

unit, one speech."[20] Mr. Ryu, it seems, was putting forth a *stiob*esque performance of his own. An overidentification with all of the criticism leveled at Laibach from within and without, the protests and headlines about Laibach resonating deeply with the kinds of criticisms leveled at north Korea. In an insightful interview on the Russian media platform COLTA, Traavik expresses his complete surprise at the speech, stating "he played us at the same time he made clear that he perfectly understands what we're up to."[21]

This scene is central in the way it suspends the known, in the ways north Korea and Laibach are mirrored, opening up a space to reflect on the nature of this "liberation." Just as Laibach functions not as an answer, but as a question, Mr. Ryu took this opportunity to perform his own provocation, another kind of liberation that utilizes the procedures of *stiob* to stage a north Korea much more complex and ambiguous.

[20] Ibid.

[21] "…он переиграл нас и в то же время дал понять, что прекрасно нас понимает" (my translation). See article Мортен Тровик: «Повернуть язык Laibach против самих Laibach» (Morten Traavik: Turning the language of Laibach against Laibach itself) on the Russian news platform COLTA: http://www.colta.ru/articles/cinema/14900 (accessed October 2017)

Whistleblowers.[22] The first song of the set comes to an end. I am moved, exhilarated, stunned, confused, anxious. I look around. The atmosphere is suspended, the crowd reserved, it is silent, as if everyone was holding their breath, then the clapping begins. It is not the ecstatic, enthusiastic clapping or whistling that one might see at a rock concert, but more of a polite, reserved clapping. I look to my north Korean friend sitting next to me, so curious to know what he thinks. He casually nods in acknowledgement and seems to withhold a smile as he responds, "cool, that was cool." His response was subdued, as ambiguous as the performance itself.

[22] Link to the video of Whistleblowers, directed by Morten Traavik (2014): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6Mx2mxpaCY

LIBERATION

Yet there is more in this "liberation to come." What was staged by Laibach in their performance was a liberation in the most capacious sense because it could bring together contradictory interpretations onto one plane, yet remain unbound in space and time. As one of the band members said to me, "there is no 'wrong' interpretation of Laibach."[23] Liberation could be understood as Korea's liberation from Japanese colonialism (the concert was held just days after the anniversary), it could imply a musical liberation (in the exposure to new and experimental sounds), or a liberation in the liberal democratic sense of freedom, liberty, independence, and individual pursuits of happiness. Embedded in the latter, liberation could also signal the need, the urge, the moral prerogative to liberate the north Korean people from the yoke of totalitarianism.

Unlike the "leftist" reactions to Laibach in the 1980s that Žižek cites, rooted in an anxiety that the public might take too seriously what Laibach imitates, and concern that Laibach might inadvertently reaffirm totalitarianism, there were very different concerns with the "leftist" discourse around the north Korea event. Something had shifted.

Greg Scarlatoiu, the executive director of the Committee for Human Rights in North Korea remarked that "while the concert was unlikely to challenge the state's grip on power, exposing everyday citizens to art and culture from the outside world may be beneficial."[24] In another article, Scarlatoiu even goes so far as to say that "Laibach surely has the '80s touch that brought the fragrance of freedom to young Eastern Europeans…[i]f there are few or no young people in the audience, the concert will be clearly just a sham, and Laibach will know it."[25] In a slightly different register, other north Korea watchers expressed concern about whether Laibach would become pawns in a state propaganda spectacle, warning that they must be "ready to sniff out the regime's attempts to instrumentalize the concert(s) for its own ends."[26] So the anxiety was no longer that the public might take Laibach's totalitarian overidentification too seriously—that logic being that totalitarianism is no longer a threat, after all, the Soviet Union is no more. The concern now, rather, was that this potentially subversive and liberating performance, that had the potential to show something of the outside world to north Koreans, might be interpolated by the totalitarian state in every step of the planning.

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[23] From a personal correspondence, August 2017

[24] As quoted numerously in the following sources:
https://www.nknews.org/2015/07/laibach-in-the-dprk-will-slovenian-band-rock-n-korea/
https://www.theguardian.com/world/gallery/2015/sep/07/north-korea-laibach-tour-in-pictures,
https://www.calvertjournal.com/news/show/4459/slovenian-band-laibach-to-be-the-first-foreign-group-in-north-korea, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/21/world/asia/laibach-concert-in-pyongyang-north-korea.html?_r=0
(accessed November 2017)

[25] A comment by Greg Scarlatoiu as quoted in the article "Laibach in the DPRK" in NK news, a popular news outlet covering a range of topics related to north Korea: https://www.nknews.org/2015/07/laibach-in-the-dprk-will-slovenian-band-rock-n-korea/ (accessed December 2017)

[26] See Christopher Green's comment quoted in the article "Socialist-era rock band to perform in Pyongyang on Liberation Day anniversary" in NK news:
https://www.nknews.org/2015/06/communist-era-rock-band-to-perform-in-pyongyang-on-victory-day-anniversary/
(accessed December 2017)

What the watchers did not account for, was that their very response to the concert was in fact part of the performance, and that they were inextricably tied to its staging. This is because Laibach's liberation is about an encounter that entangles these enclosed worlds, worlds that have become given as inherently discrete entities.

Returning to the mirror metaphor, the audience can also be expanded beyond the Ponghwa Art Theater, addressing not only the Koreans, the foreign diplomats, and fans in the audience, but also the Western media, the watchers, the experts, as well as what Monroe describes as "the abstract 'audiences' constituted by politics and society."[27] The Liberation Day concert, then, expands to something much greater than a controversial performance in north Korea. It is transcendent, spectral, sublime, what Žižek would call "staging the real of power" or what Susan Buck-Morss might identify as contact with the "wild zone of absolute power."[28]

Like the elusive object of north Korea, liberation is not something that can be encountered directly. It must come in the form of an oblique exposure, for even the practitioners themselves can be captivated in its luminescence. Laibach stages the extraordinary of power on this spectral Red Stage, where the totalitarian streak touches us all.

[27] Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 179.
[28] See See video clip Slavoj Žižek introducing Laibach in North Korea (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZl8ScVYvA and Chapter 1 of Susan Buck-Morss' *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.

RED STAGE

May 1, 2017 / Juche Year 106

We are in the south Korean city of Jeonju. It is May Day, International Workers' Day. Almost two years after the concert in the north, Laibach performs in the south. The two Koreas, the two hyper reflections of modern industrial development, the south within a capitalist teleology and the north within a socialist one, come together in red illumination. The site of their encounter is the refracted image of Mt. Paektu in the mirror of Laibach.

MT. PAEKTU

The mountain is one of the most important images in the iconography of the Red Stage. For Laibach, there is the holy Mt. Kum. In Slovenia, from where they hail, there is the peak of Mt. Triglav. Mountains also form the backdrop to *The Sound of Music*. It is within the mythos of these landscapes that Mt. Paektu, Baekdusan, the volcanic mountain with a heavenly crater lake at its peak, can make its presence felt, the place of origins and mythical national histories for both Koreas.

Mt. Paektu has been for as long as anyone can remember. It is the manifestation of eternity. It animates the national anthems of both north and south Korea. In the north, Mt. Paektu is intimately linked to the landscape of revolution and is invoked as the vital force behind the leadership. In the south, government offices are adorned with images of Mt. Paektu, as if to signal its acutely felt territorial absence more fervently.[29] Though Mt. Paektu is the spiritual heart of both Koreas, the only way southerners can reach it is via the Chinese side because the mountain stands at the border of the DPRK and China, and going through north Korea is out of the question. The bond to the mountain, however, remains strong, as thousands of south Korean tourists journey to this mountain every year, and as one visitor from the south explained: "[t]he moment I saw it, I felt like choking up, fighting back tears welling up in my eyes, something hot coming up from my heart."[30] The most enigmatic experience of the mountain is that its spectacular peak, its glorious waters, are not always visible. On some days, the mountain is enveloped in fog, and only reveals itself in glimpses.

The mountain is timeless. Its power might be likened to an aura, in the Benjaminian sense of "the unique phenomenon of distance, however close it may be." It is something too grand to contain, made of legends, myths, national histories, and incredible feats. It is pure immensity, summit after summit in a sacred presence that fills the landscape, creates its atmospheres, and orders its cosmologies. To touch the surfaces of a mountain, scale its peaks, to breathe its air, and drink from its waters connects you to the immensity, but to behold it, to see it, is also a way of inhabiting it, "because to look at the object is to plunge oneself into it," in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.[31] A mountain, then, is also the ideal phenomenon to symbolize another kind of grandeur—that of the state, its ideology and infallible glory, dangerous as it is majestic. It brings to mind the anthem of America the beautiful, purple mountain majesties, but also Mt. Paektu, the primal scene of the north Korean revolution and the source of the Paektu revolutionary bloodline.

[29] For instance, Baekdusan is described as a "holy mountain" in this article: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/27/world/asia/korea-china-baekdu-changbaishan.html (accessed August 2017)
[30] Ibid.
[31] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 67.

RED STAGE

Laibach's call to *go, go in our dreams, to go for a lifetime, to Mt. Paektu* connects to prehistories and opens up an affective path that reverberates and crisscrosses between these multiple mountain associations. In his observations of Laibach's work, Monroe has pointed to the power of the symbol/image laden with "an active energy that disrupts and reshapes the consciousness of those who come into contact with it."[32] In this way, the mountain is deployed as precisely such a "communicative symbol," and on the Red Stage, it amplifies and renders visible "the hidden codes and internal contradictions of a series of artistic, musical, political, linguistic, and historical 'regimes.'"[33] Monroe's idea of proliferations, radiating energies, and a setting in motion also brings to mind Aby Warburg's thinking on the symbol and the image as the "crystallization of an energetic charge and an emotional experience that survive as an inheritance transmitted by social memory."[34] Like Monroe's "communicative symbol," Warburg's image or "dynamogram" can be polarized or activated upon a particular kind of encounter to "bring about a complete transformation of meaning."[35] Mt. Paektu as a national symbol channels exactly this kind of energy, one that can be "reprocessed" to reach beyond the political systems in which it is embedded, to "demask and recapitulate the totalitarian potential of both state and opposition."[36]

[32] Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 5.
[33] Ibid., 7
[34] See Giorgio Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford University Press, 1999), 93–95.
[35] Ibid., Agamben is quoting Gombrich in this passage.
[36] Monroe, *Interrogation Machine*, 129, 133.

TOTALITARIAN TEMPTATION

One of the ideological mechanisms fundamental to contemporary liberal democracy is its constitution in opposition to totalitarianism. As Buck-Morss' work on mass utopia emphasizes, the Cold War political imaginaries of "east" and "west," whether socialist or capitalist in orientation, are historically entangled in the shared paradox of mass democratic sovereignty. Writing at the helm of these co-constructed dreamworlds and their demise, she contends that:

> Political regimes claiming to rule in the name of the masses—claiming, that is, to be radically democratic—construct, *legitimately*, a terrain in which the exercise of power is out of control of the masses, veiled from public scrutiny, arbitrary and absolute. Modern sovereignties harbor a blind spot, a zone in which power is above the law and thus, at least potentially, a terrain of terror. This wild zone of power, by its very structure impossible to domesticate, is intrinsic to mass-democratic regimes.[37]

This intrinsic core, the totalitarian temptation undergirding all mass-democratic systems regardless of its liberal capitalist or socialist commitments, is what Laibach stages in breathtaking glory. "Laibach is deeply aware of this deep ambiguity of even the most democratic power" and they demonstrate that only by entering the rituals, coming into contact with the aura, becoming entangled in the paradoxes, tensions, and tendencies of mass democracy, can totalitarianism be confronted, not as the fundamental opposite of liberal democracy, but each as constitutive of the other.[38]

[37] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 2–3.
[38] See video clip Slavoj Žižek introducing Laibach in North Korea (2016) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1BZl8ScVYvA

RED STAGE

April 17 2015 / Juche Year 104

Just two days after the Day of the Sun, the commemoration of Great Leader Kim Il Sung's birth, Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un makes a visit to the divine peak / 성산 of Mt. Paektu. That same month, the celebrated Moranbong Band releases the hit song *We will go to Mt. Paektu* / 가리라 백두산으로. Later that year, Laibach produces a "new original" of the song that "reprocesses" and "reappropriates" the cooptation, to borrow again Monroe's terms, in the service of their own work.

ILLUMINATION

Laibach, however, was not able to perform *We will go to Mt. Paektu* as planned. Other songs were cut from their set list as well, but this one in particular, with its mobilization of mountain imagery, must have roused something in the censorship committee. Traavik explained that his partners were the ones who initially suggested *We will go to Mt. Paektu* as part of a trio of Korean songs that Laibach could perform, but they did not know what they were getting and ultimately were not pleased with Laibach's interpretation, expressing that it was "too ugly."[39] Perhaps the north Korean decision to cut Mt. Paektu was "pure survival instinct," Traavik said to me in a personal communication. The Laibach version was just "too far out" and there was just "too big of a chance that someone could claim it as a mockery" or use it against them to criticize the concert.[40]

The song was not performed, but its absence was made present in the Liberation Day film as background music at the welcome reception, in the images of Mt. Paektu, and in the censorship committee's unease around the song. Sacred Mt. Paektu, after all, is the legendary heart of Great Leader Kim Il Sung's guerilla resistance, the birthplace of Dear Leader Kim Jong Il, and is synonymous with political sovereignty and the origins of the north Korean socialist revolution.

We will go to Mt. Paektu was staged in the other Korea however. Considering that probably no one in the audience had heard the song before (a north Korean song), and that they probably did not know who or what Laibach was (until just moments before when the Liberation Day film was screened), the crowd reacted incredibly enthusiastically, overwhelmingly so. Ugis Olte, co-director of the film, who was shooting footage at the concert commented, "I'd have to say that a Korean mega-hit is a Korean mega-hit no matter which side of the fence you're on. People really dug it, like really dug it, singing along from the first chorus."[41]

Laibach, in their staging of the song induced a red illumination that enabled southerners and northerners to coexist on one plane, to see the same mountain, hear the same resonance, and be moved by the same presence, however impossibly distant and intimate the encounter.

[39] From a personal correspondence, January 2017
[40] Ibid.
[41] From a personal correspondence, May 2015 but also quoted in the following article: http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/liberation-day-directors-documenting-first-foreign-bands-performance-north-korea-999510

CHAPTER 5 /
ECHOLOCATION

ECHO

My eyes cannot locate this border.
The Korean Demilitarized Zone.
The DMZ.
The buffer zone dividing north and south since 1953.

LOCATION

It is said that the DMZ is at once the most heavily militarized border in the world, the last relic of the Cold War, the most volatile place on earth, the open wound of national division, a symbol of future peace and reunification, and an ecological haven.[1] This is the place where "south" faces "north," the other Korea. But as soon as I try to see this border and locate these markers, I also encounter its impossibility.

The boundaries of the DMZ are often described in fixed terms, invoking first the Military Demarcation Line (MDL), the line roughly following the thirty-eighth parallel that splits Korea in half, then extending two kilometers south and two kilometers north of that line and cutting across the peninsula for 248 kilometers to determine its boundaries.[2] Beyond this zone is another zone, the Civilian Control Zone (CCZ), a restricted area extending between five and twenty kilometers from the southern boundary of the DMZ, distinguished by the complex overlap between agricultural and military infrastructures.[3] But when maps chart these boundaries, they do so unreliably, as both the DMZ and CCZ have been shifting and shrinking over time. If one were to superimpose the many cartographic representations of these areas, there would be "a fuzzy image of the borderland" to contend with.[4]

From the vantage point of south Korean security tourism, the DMZ is foremost an optical experience. The numerous observatories along the border feature large panoramic windows that frame a vast landscape of rolling hills and mountains, the scene of a *there*. Super binoculars transport the gaze to distant points on the horizon, poor in resolution and stability, but evoking a disorienting immediacy to the north. From *here*, you are practically zoomed *there*, only, the two views, the macro and micro of the terrain are irreconcilable. The north is just there, yet so out of reach.

[1] For instance, Eleana Kim points to the "return to nature" phenomenon that focuses on the DMZ as a space of ecological exception, and the problems associated with taking this vision head on. See Eleana Kim, "Invasive Others and Significant Others: Strange Kinship and Interspecies Ethics near the Korean Demilitarized Zone," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 84, no. 1 (May 19, 2017): 205.

[2] Shannon McCune calls this a "purely geodetic line," meaning it is not visible, the line is "found on maps but is not evident in the geographic landscape." See "The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea," 223.

[3] I am uncertain whether there is a corresponding notion from the northern boundary.

[4] From a personal correspondence with Alex Young Il Seo, in reference to his project on this border region. See "Constructing Frontier Villages: Human Habitation in the South Korean Borderlands after the Korean War" (PhD Dissertation, University of Cambridge, 2020); "From Disorderly Dispersion to Orderly Concentration: Frontier Villages at the Korean Border 1951-1973," *Scroope: Cambridge Architecture Journal*, 2018.

ECHO

"We are unsure where they are.
They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze."[5]

[5] Gernot Böhme on atmospheres and their indeterminate ontological status: "We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone of feeling like a haze." See "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics:," trans. David Roberts, *Thesis Eleven*, no. 36 (1993): 114.

LOCATION

A military interlocutor explained to me that most people don't really know what or where the DMZ is. They may think they know, but probably can't locate it. The DMZ is an impossible border because how does one follow its system of lines and coordinates at once so clear and reliable, yet blurry and disorienting? But impossible still because it is not a border that can be crossed. The other Korea is the forbidden secret of this Korea.

So there I stand at the boundary between two hyper reflections of capitalist and communist modernity.[6] And suddenly, I am caught in a Cold War optics. These rituals of seeing at the border operate within this logic, an optical machinery, an apparatus that structures the visual. This seeing demands participation in the production of the DMZ, the idea of the south and the idea of the north, in which the landscape is rendered flat, in which the by now all too familiar satellite image of the Koreas at night, one glowing in the light of industrial progress and the other dimmed in totalitarian darkness, always already makes sense. Because aerial views, whether seen from the heights of an observatory or produced by satellite imaging, always both exceed and fall short in their representations.[7]

What is it that manifests in this excess and lack, between the *here* and *there*, in the space of a gap?

[6] I follow here Susan Buck-Morss in situating both capitalist/nation-state and socialist/class warfare models of political sovereignty as part of the same project of modernity, the same dream of mass democratic sovereignty that begins with the French Revolution. See *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*.
[7] Caren Kaplan, *Aerial Aftermaths: Wartime from Above* (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2018).

ECHO

High-power loudspeaker broadcasts from north to south and south to north resonate through the border zone, producing a distinctive sonic environment that is voluminous, expanding and contracting as it crescendos and decrescendos. World news, K-pop, military marches, anthems, weather updates, propagandistic proclamations, songs of love, longing, and loss echo in and out and across the DMZ reverberating nearer or further depending on topography, weather patterns, and the time of day.[8] Echoes announce the moving body of the border, establishing a shared spatial volumetric, an interstitial space of contact and mutual imagining, an ambient hum, an atmosphere. Its sonic contours are sinuous, swelling with song on clear nights and dampening to a layered silence with the rains, while ridges and valleys scatter sound waves and folds produce echo chambers, bringing to mind Franck Billé's suggestion towards a more sensuous and synesthetic sensitivity in ethnographic engagements with borders.[9]

Sound enables an encounter with the border in ways that elude the burden of the optical regime. Sound cannot be contained in the way that optics seek maintenance upon territory. Sound offers an apprehension of space that gets at a "volumetric imaginary," bringing anthropology and geography together on the question of aesthetics and atmospheres in an experience of a scene affectively charged and palpable yet spatially diffuse and abstract. For Elizabeth Straughan and Harriet Hawkins, the concept is grounded in approaches that center "the immersion of the body in the three-dimensional world within which we live, encounter and experience…an immersion that can be noted in the tangibility and physicality of sensuous encounters with the materialities of the world, a recognition that is generated through our attentiveness to experience."[10] The challenge lies in the demands of responding to, writing, and conveying this "intermediate phenomenon," the destabilizing modes of negotiating ambivalence and indeterminacy.[11]

In this sense, the loudspeaker broadcasts cannot be understood as mere remnants of Cold War era propaganda, as direct extensions of the optical regime of territorial sovereignty, or simply another instance of sonic warfare. Echoes, rather, become a sensory portal, a kind of threshold to an "imaginal" space, an "elsewhere" that is the very manifestation of projections, anxiety, and fear, but also curiosity, loss, desire, and healing. My foregrounding of "imaginal" (instead of "imaginary") is informed by Stefania Pandolfo's work on the imagination, which draws from

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[8] A sonic range of 10 to 24 kilometers is widely cited in news media. For examples, see Simeon Paterson, "Korean loudspeakers: What are the North and South shouting about," *BBC*, January 12, 2016, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-35278451 and Dagyum Ji, "K-pop, handbags and democracy: South Korean payback for North's nuclear test," *Reuters*, January 8, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/north-korea-nuclear-speakers-idUSKBN0UM0UZ20160108 and Justin McCurry, "Sonic Attack: why South Korea bombards the North with news, K-pop and good times," *The Guardian*, December 3, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/world/shortcuts/2017/dec/03/sonic-attack-why-south-korea-bombards-the-north-with-news-k-pop-and-good-times and "S. Korea to expand loudspeaker broadcasts at inter-Korean border, *Arirang News*, July 6, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zgr1TT_kN1A (accessed June 2018).

[9] Frank Billé explores this through the analogy of "border-as-skin" that proposes a mode of spatial apprehension finely attuned to tactility, haptics, texture, depth, and volume. See "Skinworlds: Borders, Haptics, Topologies," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36, no. 1 (February 1, 2018): 60–77.

[10] Elizabeth Straughan and Harriet Hawkins, "Conclusion: Reimagining Geoaesthetics," in *Geographical Aesthetics: Imagining Space, Staging Encounters* (Routledge, 2015), 290.

[11] Gernot Böhme, *The Aesthetics of Atmospheres*, ed. Jean-Paul Thibaud (Routledge, 2016), 168.

Arabic and European philosophical traditions and psychoanalysis to rethread the imaginative faculty as a relational realm of experience and knowledge.[12] This unsettles the modern rendering of imagination as illusion, fancy, unreal, or as an agent of individual creativity. In suggesting here that the echo is of the imaginal in its structure as absent-presence, repetition, and accumulation, in its atmospheric haze and unlocatability, is to attempt to render differently the experience of this border. Not as the sharp edge that separates this Korea from the other, not as a singular event that shapes the division, and not as a representation of this reality, but as a site where an outside to the north-south paradigm becomes possible.

Studies of border experience in socialist and postsocialist contexts demonstrate this in a number of ways, that borders as "intensely symbolic" places necessarily take on cultural practices and meanings beyond their intended purpose of inscribing state power onto landscapes and bodies.[13] In the practical impossibility of encountering the other side, there manifests a dream of the other side.[14] As in the "Imaginary West" of the late Soviet period that Alexei Yurchak describes, "the West" was produced as an intimate, dynamic, experiential social and cultural world, precisely because the actual West was not a place one could go to.[15] This was a world "simultaneously knowable and unattainable, tangible and abstract, mundane and exotic" because "the West" was not about any actually existing place, but rather an "elsewhere" of shared desires, interests, creativity, and possibility.[16]

Similarly in Daphne Berdhal's ethnography of a border village between East and West Germany, despite the "daily contact with and observance of the border and its operations, much of the border remained a mystery."[17] So as much as the border was routinized, an "irritating, mysterious, and potentially dangerous fact of daily life," it was also the "stuff of stories and legends."[18] It elaborated worlds and invited unanticipated ways of imagining the other side.

There are yet other ways of apprehending the border from beyond the north/south divide, as Hoon Song suggests in his writings on "prefiguration" in relation to "defection," to give "expression to the inner measure of History's 'capacity' to change, move, and rupture; to the pathos-overfilled remembrance of all those 'could have beens' that never came or came too

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[12] In reference to Pandolfo's articulation of the imaginal alongside Henri Corbin and Giorgio Agamben, see Chapter 5 "*Taʿbīr*: Figuration and the Torment of Life" in *Knot of the Soul* (University of Chicago Press, 2018), 175. See also Henry Corbin, *Mundus Imaginalis: Or, The Imaginary and the Imaginal*, trans. Ruth Horine (Golgonooza Press, 1976); Giorgio Agamben, *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, trans. Liz Heron (Verso, 1993), 24–25.

[13] Daphne Berdahl, *Where the World Ended: Re-Unification and Identity in the German Borderland* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 154–55.

[14] The south Korean drama series *Crash Landing on You* (2019-2020) is such an instance of this dream of the other side.

[15] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*. See in particular Chapter 5 "Imaginary West: The Elsewhere of Late Socialism."

[16] Yurchak, 159. It is also crucial to note that the emergence and elaboration of this world was "not in contradiction to the ethics and aesthetics of state socialism," and was instead, "explicitly produced and implicitly enabled by the socialist project itself" (160).

[17] Berdahl, *Where the World Ended*, 154.

[18] Berdahl, 151–52.

late."[19] Berdhal describes a moment that transpires just days after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a moment that Song also turns to. Thorsten, who used to dream of being able to see Kella (his hometown) from the other side of the border, who once thought this was "as unlikely as being able to fly to the moon," suddenly finds himself on the other side, the West:

> One of the first things I did after the borders opened…was to go to Braunrode. I looked for the exact spot where my western relatives would have stood when they came to look at Kella. And when I found it, I couldn't fight back the tears.[20]

Berdhal explains that "Thorsten was repeating a ritual already established by villagers who had been to the West on special passes before the Wende."[21] For instance, another interlocutor tells the story of his own experience of looking from the West, from the "Window to Kella":

> I will always remember this impression. I looked through the binoculars and could see my son coming home, my wife outside the house…Here is where the world ended.[22]

The sudden, uncontrollable tears, the sensation of rupture in looking from the place where the world ended, for Song, these are moments of prefiguration in that the tears, the rupture "images" that which "cannot be 'represented' or 'explained,'" all of the possible worlds that could have been.[23] Tears, rupture, and echoes, too.

As Madeleine Reeves reminds us, borders are "*intrinsically* multiple."[24] Multiple in the sense that the border exists in the map, the border guard, the check point, in our heads, and so on, in various objects and people and places and times, because for Reeves "these are *different* borders, not merely different perspectives on a singular spatial entity."[25] When I look through the binoculars at the DMZ, what I confront is this voluminous multiplicity. The DMZ is unlocatable because it is both here, there, everywhere, and nowhere. It is echoes, then, and the attendant practices of listening that make possible another form of encounter, where sound is remnant, debris, stutters from another realm.

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[19] Hoon Song read together Marilyn Strathern's concept of "prefiguration" and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's concept of perspectivism to recast the event of "defection" from north to south Korea. And in this context of north/south "bipolarity," where the defector's "movement in space and time is but a teleological and instrumental transport between one State to another," "capacity" here denotes a more "nomadic" movement, not in the sense of "freedom of movement," freedom to move between North and South or East and West, to cross impossible borders, but as the capacity to inhabit another realm of "could have beens" of other "possible worlds." See Hoon Song, "Prefigured 'Defection' in Korea," in *Queering Knowledge: Analytics, Devices, and Investments after Marilyn Strathern*, ed. Paul Boyce, E. J. Gonzalez-Polledo, and Silvia Posocco (Routledge, 2020), 120.
[20] Berdahl, *Where the World Ended*, 157–60. I thank Hoon Song for bringing my attention to this moment in the text, and for our early discussion on the topic of tears.
[21] Berdahl, 160.
[22] Berdahl, 160.
[23] Song, "Prefigured 'Defection' in Korea."
[24] Madeleine Reeves, *Border Work: Spatial Lives of the State in Rural Central Asia* (Cornell University Press, 2014), 245.
[25] Reeves, 245.

LOCATION

Flatlands surrounded by mountains. Tucked inside a convergence of hills is the village of Yangjiri, where I lived for two months as part of an art and research residency.[26]

There is the village square with a shop and gathering hall for the elders. There is the mountain to the left and another to the right. The one on the left marks the boundary with the south Korean 6th Infantry Division military base. The one on the right is positioned north. On the other side of that mountain is a reservoir, then more mountains, and north Korea is somewhere just beyond that. Fog descends upon the village late in the night and dissipates with the rising sun.

[26] My residency period in Yangjiri was from September to October 2016, hosted by the "Real DMZ Project," an initiative put forth by Samuso, a Seoul-based curatorial office led by Kim Sunjung. For a discussion on the political administration of this region, see Alex Young Il Seo's article "From Disorderly Dispersion to Orderly Concentration: Frontier Villages at the Korean Border 1951-1973." This is where "frontier villages" like Yangjiri became what Seo calls the "foundational architectural mechanism that enabled the implementation of South Korea's ideological, territorial, and economic strategies at a national scale" (44). See also the work of the artist Chan Sook Choi who spent time in Yangjiri as part of the same residency, in particular her film "Re-move" on the notion of historical accumulation (12:45-18:20): https://chansookchoi.com/Re-move_Film

ECHO

Fascinated by the echoes, we went out for a late-night stroll in the village following the loudspeaker broadcast, hoping to capture something of the sounds from the other side on our phones. Why is this playing so late? Who would listen? Perhaps it's not for "listening" in the usual sense. The sound would feel close then seem distant again as we walked towards the echoes. We made our way from the residency house, through the center of town bathed in the red light of a church cross, to the periphery of the village on a gravel path dotted with the blue-green light of tungsten street lamps. Then darkness. Village life is so quiet, so empty after the sun sets. It's hard not to be enveloped by the echoes.

A distinct part of life here are the loudspeaker broadcasts from the north to the south.[27] Revolutionary songs, marches, melancholy odes, and intervals of fervent ideological announcements fill the space of darkness. From the first night until the night before my departure, I either fell asleep to these echoes from the north, was awakened by them in the night, or awoke to a dawn drenched in song and mist. "Rain dreams the sounds," and it was so with the last of the monsoon showers and the turning of the seasons.[28]

[27] The broadcasts directed from the south to the north do not reach Yangjiri, but echo through numerous points on security tourism itineraries along the border. For instance, at Woljeongri Station in Cheorwon province, a popular tourist destination within the CCZ that commemorates a broken railway line to north Korea, echoes of both broadcasts can be heard.

[28] Theresa Hak Young Cha, *Dictée* (Tanam Press, 1982), 71.

LOCATION

"Anyone who has become entranced by the sound of dripping water in the darkness of a ruin can attest to the extraordinary capacity of the ear to carve a volume into the void of darkness," Juhani Pallasmaa writes.[29] In the articulation of this border, sound works as an emplacement device. Biosonar and echolocation in bats and dolphins are useful parallels, as are human adaptations to visual impairment in facilitating a vibrational form, an echoed shape of that which is inaccessible through vision.[30]

As sounds are emitted to the surrounding world, the return transmissions, the echoes, enable an imagined locatedness beyond the surface of the north south divide. In this mountain terrain, locating a where through echoes offers another way of entering the "inter" in the politically entrenched, visually illegible scene of the inter-Korean border.

[29] Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses* (Academy Press, 2005), 50.
[30] In the film *Notes on Blindness*, for example, the theologian David Hull describes an experience of emplacement in relation to sound: "Rain brings out the contours of what's around you in that in introduces a continuous blanket of differentiated but specialized sound, uninterrupted, which fills the whole of the audible environment. If only there could be something equivalent to rain falling inside, then the whole of the room would take on shape and dimension…" Cited from the short version of the film: https://vimeo.com/85167194 (accessed January 2019).

ECHO

Muffled, broken, echoes of sounds. The affective quality of echoes, potent precisely because of its diffuseness, lends a powerful atmospherics to this border zone. They are enmeshed with impossible desire. The echoes stir because they are not readily identifiable to a location, not immediately traceable to a place or even or accessible. The echoes encompass delay, reflection, repetition, reverberation, distortion.[31] The echoes are erratic, discontinuous, its sonic body swelling, thick and intense in certain geographies and diminished to frays and traces in others.

[31] Jean-François Augoyard and Henri Torgue, *Sonic Experience: A Guide to Everyday Sounds* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005).

LOCATION

We are technically inside the DMZ, the soldier tells us.
One can be in the zone and not know it.

This observatory is only 800 meters from a north Korean guard post, one of the closest points between the north and the south, so it is located in the DMZ.[32] He leads us through the rest of the tour, explaining that the north Koreans violated the military armistice agreement by moving their guard post southward, closer to the 38th parallel, so the south Koreans had no choice but to respond to the provocation by moving their guard post as well, in coordination with the United Nations Command. We missed the detail about how this former guard post once inaccessible to civilians became a functioning touristic viewing deck. Unlike other observatories managed by the Korea Tourism Organization, this particular one was under the auspices of the south Korean military.[33]

At the center of the room is a model replica of the scene, which is used to orient visitors to the landscape. The MDL, the line of division, is a perforated line in the diorama. There is no line in the terrain, only the suggestion of a line. Our guide explains that the markers placed after the war were difficult to reach, improperly maintained, and have since faded and disappeared. This leads to disputes between the north and south about where exactly the line is. I reply, wondering if the DMZ is a kind of void since no one really knows where the line is, and the soldier says, well, both sides basically avoid going near it. The border is so empty, yet its emptiness profoundly orders the space around it.

Even with all of the infrastructure designed to structure the seeing—maps, dioramas, binoculars—it was hard to understand where exactly we were. What the eye cannot see is precisely this destabilization. The DMZ is not something we can *see*. What if instead of looking for a demarcation between a here and a there, this border is more fully explored as a sonic body, one that Kathleen Stewart might say produces a sense of being caught up in *something*, or that Ben Anderson might link to an affective atmosphere, or that Stuart Elden might maintain has political resonance?[34]

It must be the possibility of alterity, crossing from a *here* to a *there*, that is so thrilling as it is unsettling at the border. I can trace the feeling to a moment at the Joint Security Area in the DMZ, the famous venue where north and south Korean soldiers faceoff between a concrete strip demarcating one side from the other. I entered the conference building, unmistakably painted UN blue, and walked its length from south to north, mesmerized as everyone else was to be "in the north," or even wilder, to be standing simultaneously in both north and south. To be both here and there is to be nowhere in this ideological divide, and my notion of self is entangled in another gravity beyond my recognition and control.

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[32] From a conversation with a soldier at the Key Observatory in Yeoncheon county (March 2018): https://tour.yeoncheon.go.kr:8443/webEng/main#none (accessed June 2018).
[33] For instance, the Cheorwon Peace Observatory near Yangjiri: http://english.visitkorea.or.kr/enu/ATR/SI_EN_3_1_1_1.jsp?cid=1733136 (accessed June 2018).
[34] Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*; Anderson, "Affective Atmospheres"; Stuart Elden, "Secure the Volume: Vertical Geopolitics and the Depth of Power," *Political Geography* 34 (May 1, 2013): 35–51.

Regarding the division of Berlin, Maurice Blanchot writes that crossing the divide does not mean "going from one country to another, one language to another, but, within the same country and the same language, going from 'truth' to 'error', 'evil' to 'good', 'life' to 'death.'"[35] Echoes may offer a way to transgress these dualisms. In the ritual of defining one Korea against another, what demands more careful consideration is *dis*location or *unl*ocation or beyond location, in the confrontation with a moment of not really inhabiting north or south but another realm altogether. In a sense, one is always asked to pledge allegiance as a necessary part of the political technique and regime of this border. What this moment of hiatus offers is to sit with a void, and with that, to imagine other ontologies of location and the kind of being that location makes possible. This perhaps is what Doreen Massey meant in thinking about movement through space as inherently a way "to *alter* space," in an "imaginative opening up of space" that can tell another story of the DMZ.[36]

[35] Maurice Blanchot, "The Name Berlin," in *The Blanchot Reader*, ed. Michael Holland, 1st edition (Wiley-Blackwell, 1995), 267.
[36] Doreen Massey, *For Space* (SAGE Publications, 2005), 118.

ECHO

People would sometimes describe the broadcasts as incomprehensible garbled nonsense. Some spoke of them as pure propaganda, it just sounds like propaganda you know, the kind that proclaims the greatness of the leaders and the communist state, regardless of whether we could make out the words. Some would recall earlier days, explaining that the songs were like lullabies. Some said the broadcasts were louder back then. Some found them a nuisance. Some noticed them like they did everyday things like the weather.

Sound, unlike vision, is "omni-directional."[37]

"How does an atmosphere 'envelope' and 'press' upon life?" Anderson asks.[38] That is, how do we feel or sense or know we are in the midst of something? He points to the spatial dimension of atmospheres and how they can be intensified through certain practices such as landscape design and architecture, shaped through light, sounds, symbols.[39] In the DMZ, the atmosphere sustained by the echoes, the sonic range of the broadcasts flowing in and out, are akin to voluminous waves that summon the other side not only omni-directionally, like an envelope, but also in manifold ways.

[37] Pallasmaa, *The Eyes of the Skin*, 49.
[38] Anderson, *Affective Atmospheres*, 77.
[39] Anderson, *Affective Atmospheres*, 80.

LOCATION

I watched as groups of elderly Korean tourists approached the panoramic window framing the mountain landscape.[40]

Where is the north?
How do you use these binoculars?
Do you see anything?
I can't see anything!

In the tradition of Chinese landscape painting, emptiness is not something "vague or nonexistent" but rather "dynamic and active," and is the "preeminent site of transformation, the place where fullness can attain its whole measure."[41] Not seeing anything, not seeing the north in this mountain landscape, this emptiness can then introduce "discontinuity and reversibility" into this optical regime.[42] Not seeing anything opens to two realms, the visible and invisible, sound and silence, whereby the echo becomes the intermediary between.

[40] At the Cheorwon Peace Observatory (July 2015).
[41] François Cheng, *Empty and Full: The Language of Chinese Painting* (Shambhala, 1994), 36.
[42] Cheng, 36.

ECHO

One by one.
The sounds. The sounds that move at a time
stops. Starts again. Exception
stops and starts again
all but exceptions.
Stop. Start. Starts.
Contractions. Noise. Semblance of noise.
Broken speech. One to one. At a time.
Cracked tongue. Broken tongue. [43]

[43] Cha, *Dictée*, 75.

LOCATION

The loudspeaker broadcasts have ceased.

Following the Inter-Korea Summit of May 2018, where Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un of the north met with President Moon Jae-in of the south, the reconciliation was symbolized by the dismantling of loudspeaker machinery at the border.

The two-sided sonic aggressions are generally traced to the late 1950s, early 60s to the advent of psychological sound warfare infrastructure at the border, an effort to garner ideological influence over the other side.[44] Though the broadcasts have long stopped serving this purpose, they have been understood as a kind of litmus test of the political climate between the Koreas, the more hostile the relations, the more voluminously the border resounds.[45]

But what happens when it all goes silent?

As of this writing, the sound border no longer exists but the DMZ still does, the impossibility still does. As Patty Ahn suggests, perhaps we can begin to sense that "in tension with this sonic dissipation there exists a vibrational and affective accumulation of *other* kinds of sounds, images, and memories: a swelling of unforgotten cries and wounds, unmitigated anxieties and enduring hopes."[46] Silence as emptiness in the Asian philosophical tradition is what "creates a space that enables the sounds to transcend themselves and accede to a kind of resonance beyond the resonances."[47]

[44] For a summary of the ways in which radio, broadcasting, and sound more generally have been mobilized militarily, see Alasdair Pinkerton and Klaus Dodds, "Radio Geopolitics: Broadcasting, Listening and the Struggle for Acoustic Spaces," *Progress in Human Geography* 33, no. 1 (February 1, 2009): 10–27. The timeline of the loudspeaker broadcasts as described in observatory visitor materials.

[45] For instance, after Pyongyang's hydrogen bomb test in January 2016, the Park administration shut down the Kaesong Industrial Complex, a manufacturing facility at the border that is infrastructurally south Korean but built in the north Korean city of Kaesong utilizing north Korean labor. The broadcasts resumed again after 11 years of silence.

[46] Patty Ahn, "The Sounds of Demilitarized Peace," *Social Text* website (2018): https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/the-sounds-of-demilitarized-peace/ (accessed January 2019).

[47] Cheng, *Empty and Full*, 36.

ECHO

I was speaking with the old man down the road that tends to the vegetable plot at the residency house. We started to talk about the observatory nearby. Have you been there? He asks because of course it's one of those mandatory stops when visiting the border area, along with the infiltration tunnels, taxidermy halls, exhibits of north Korean artifacts, and shops that sell north Korean currency and liquor. He told me about his visit to the observatory in Paju, another border province where his relatives live. He could see figures, houses, activity but didn't know how to read the scene. People like me, he said, we don't really understand what we are seeing, what we are supposed to be seeing. My struggle with what to make of the vast emptiness, the endless hills of green, shifted with this sentiment.

LOCATION

An image of a mountainscape opens the chapter. Looking from this space of overlap, I ask as Vincent Crapanzano does, how the "irreality of the imaginary impresses the real on reality and the real of reality compels the irreality of the imaginary."[48] He points to an imaginal, asymptotic movement that occurs in the experience of a beyond that is an elsewhere yet intimately bound to the here and now. The tricky part of this movement is that as soon as it is described, it slips away, as in a vivid visceral dream that dissipates in the process of retelling it, though in that disjuncture, something is revealed in the way of Andrei Tarkovsky's enigmatic *zona*.

Perhaps the only way to encounter north Korea is to unsee it, not to look for it on the other side, not to observe it directly, but to resist the arrested image of the north that has been "reduced to the *visual*," as Trinh T. Minh-ha would say.[49] This is the spatial poetics of the echo, echoing a location in the infinite horizon of the DMZ, the shared object of imagination manifesting the other to each.

[48] *Imaginative Horizons: An Essay in Literary-Philosophical Anthropology* (University of Chicago Press, 2004), 15.
[49] Here Trinh Minh-ha in reference to the film critic Serge Daney, makes a distinction between the visual and the image. The visual "refers to seeing what is given as legible, so that one can talk about the visual of a newspaper, for example, even when there's no photos in it. Whereas the *image* refers to an experience of vision that inherently involves *alterity* (or otherness)…and as Daney suggested, we're heading toward societies that know more and more how to *read* (to decipher or to decode), but less and less how to *see*…what tends to go unseen is that which can radically not be said or shown directly." See "Scent, Sound, and Cinema with Mary Zournazi," in *Cinema-Interval* (Routledge, 2013), 252.

ECHO

the in-between-time: from when a sound is made
to when it returns as an echo
no one knows if it was heard,
when it was heard
when it would be heard
if ever at all
but it continues on and on and on
maybe thousand years

someone's memory
tale
legend
poem
dream [50]

[50] From Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's poem "echo" in *Exilée: Temps Morts : Selected Works* (University of California Press, 2009), 28–29.

CHAPTER 6 /
RETURN WITHOUT DEPARTURE

1

At a souvenir shop in Pyongyang, I bought a travel journal with a faux red leather cover and gold embossed lettering that read "Sightseeing Trip to Korea." It was an object from a different world, not only the aesthetic, the font, and the grainy color reproductions, but the kind of universe found within it. I was surprised to see air and rail timetables in the final pages, to see scheduled flights from Pyongyang to Beijing, Berlin, Moscow, Khabarovsk, Macau, Bangkok, and trains to Sinuiju, Dandong, Manzhouli, Zabaikal, Tumangang, Hassan, Beijing, Moscow. Though I myself had crisscrossed the globe to get to Pyongyang, leaving San Francisco for Seoul, then moving from Incheon to Dandong by ferry, to Beijing by train, and finally to Pyongyang on a much-anticipated Air Koryo flight, somehow these routes, these itineraries, did not, could not intersect. They felt distant and of a different time, the time or *is it dream?* of socialism.

What would it mean to see north Korea not from the present, but from this moment of an unexpected encounter with an object of that place and time?

If the modern political vision of socialism is one based in time, its landscape ordered by the "historical trajectory of revolutionary time," as Susan Buck-Morss suggests in *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, then making visible history, the construction of socialism, the future utopia in the making, was a project of utmost importance.[1] To bring about the new world of socialism, the people would need to "*see* history," to understand the "meaning of history," to enter a new conception of time, and the state needed to bring this into being, to make this new social reality felt, where the "revolution entered the phenomenal world of the everyday."[2]

But of course Buck-Morss is speaking from another time. The time of revolutionary rupture, in the immediate aftermath of Soviet collapse, in the "shattering of that time structure" that for so long imaged socialism.[3]

It is this time that I encountered in the travel journal.
A fragment from this historical continuum, a dreamworld now in pieces.
Recollected here as ten broken moments that do not add up to a whole.

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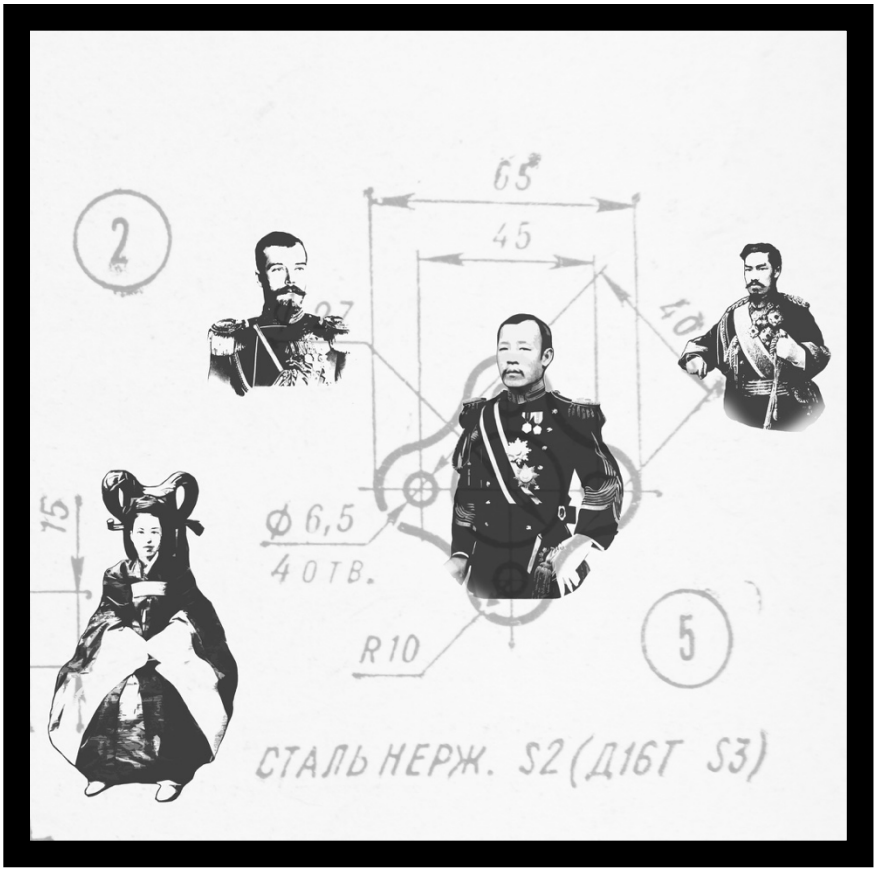
[1] Buck-Morss distinguishes between two distinct visions of modern mass democracy, a nation-state model centered on space and territory ("to be a nation is to possess a territory" p22) and the class warfare model which is temporal, ("victory is described in terms of historical progress" p23 and "It is history that legitimates political revolution" p.43). For her discussion on the "Dreamworlds of History," see Part II of *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 45., especially Chapter 2 where she discusses the revolutionary time of socialism.

[2] This of course was not a simple matter: "Mass support existed for the October events, but it was not of a single mind. Millennialists, avant-gardists, and utopian dreams of every sort were eager to interpret the revolutionary future as their own. Bolshevism needed to speak for all of these people, structuring their desires inside a historical continuum that, at the same time, contained their force. In the process of being inserted into the temporal narrative of revolutionary history, the utopian dimension of a wide variety of discourses was constrained and reduced." Buck-Morss, 42–43. See also Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton University Press, 1992).

[3] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 62.


65
45
2
5
R10
Ø 6,5
4 ОТВ.
15
СТАЛЬ НЕРЖ. S2 (Д16Т S3)

2

Almaty, former capital of the Soviet Republic of Kazakhstan, in what is now Central Asia, where this temporal logic once extended, where it was once linked to "the Soviet transport system that placed all of the Soviet Union officially on Moscow time," where there was life unfolding within the historical trajectory of socialist revolution.[4] Here too, that time has ruptured, and in the disorientation and aftermath of its unraveling, released from the teleological vision of progress, time could be again an open category and take on new forms.

How to remap history, not in the logic of a vanguard temporality that had "a monopoly over time's meaning," but in terms of an avant-garde "*lived* temporality of interruption, estrangement, arrest."?[5] We would first need to "bring the ruins up close and work our way through the rubble."[6]

To inhabit again the time of Buck-Morss in the midst of Soviet disintegration, and to access again that dream of socialism, I follow a passage that frames my journey:

> When an era crumbles, "History breaks down into images, not into stories." Without the narration of continuous progress, the images of the past resemble night dreams, the "first mark" of which, Freud tells us, is their emancipation from "the spatial and temporal order of events." Such images, as dream images, are complex webs of memory and desire wherein past experience is rescued and, perhaps, redeemed. Only partial interpretations of these images are possible, and in a critical light. But they may be helpful if they illuminate patches of the past that seem to have a charge of energy about them precisely because the dominant narrative does not connect them seamlessly to the present. The historical particulars might then be free to enter into different constellations of meaning.[7]

Pyongyang appears differently in the dream images that circulate through Almaty. The history of Korea, its pasts and futures, appear in fragments, juxtapositions, loops, sedimented layers, crusty, broken, embers.

The image that precedes this section, is one such image. It is one tableau from a larger montage work that comprises *Model for the Assembly* by the artist Alexander Ugay. It is an endeavor that seeks to renarrate history, at once a composition, decomposition, and recomposition of pieces likened to the construction of industrial machinery, as scenes from Soviet Korean history are layered over Soviet engineering diagrams. The figures of Queen Min, Tsar Nicholas II, Min Young Hwan, and Emperor Meiji assembled over a stainless-steel mechanical part.

[4] Buck-Morss, 25.
[5] Buck-Morss, 60,62.
[6] Buck-Morss, 68.
[7] Buck-Morss, 68. The opening line "History breaks down into images, not into stories" is from Walter Benjamin.

3

Exile has been associated with the expanse of the Kazakh steppe, the frozen tundra of Siberia, places peripheral to the center of socialist revolution.[8] At the edges of the Soviet Union, away from the rupture of the Japanese annexation of Korea (1910), away from the rupture of the division of Korea (1945), away from the rupture of the Korean War (1950-1953), there was another time, one that offered refuge and continuity, where the struggle for national liberation coincided with socialist revolution. Contrary to the dominant narrative of the Soviet Korean diaspora formed in the violence and aftermath of the Stalinist deportations, exile here takes on a different significance.

"What is true of all exile is not that home and love of home are lost, but that loss is inherent in the very existence of both."[9] In other words, the notion of home as Kathleen Stewart renders it, is a "place made present by an absence," that "grows tactile with the longing emergent in the memory of a violent tearing," becoming "an occupied place re-membered as a site of magical consubstantiality."[10]

[8] This distance is not understood in terms of geographic distance, but in terms of different temporalities, different stages in history, different proximities to the sacred, and thus differs from the usual logic of center-periphery. In the introduction to the edited volume, *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (University of Washington Press, 2003)., Evgeny Dobrenko and Eric Naiman point to "the paradoxical centrality of the periphery in the Stalinist landscape. The provinces and edges of the nation were continually labeled periphery, yet this insistence on distance was often paired with an affirmation that distance could be magically annihilated" (xv). I read this as linked to Susan Buck-Morss's framework of time (see footnote 1). As Katerina Clark writes in one of the volume's chapters, "The role of the masses is to be forever in motion, striving to attain 'Moscow,' to enter that extraordinary space to which an extraordinary degree of activity (speed) will transport them. But they can attain 'Moscow' only figuratively, fleetingly, or tokenly" (14). This of course is representative of the notion that "Stalin stands…in a different order of time and space" (16). See "Socialist Realism and the Sacralizing of Space," in *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (University of Washington Press, 2003), 3–18.
[9] Kathleen Stewart is here thinking exile with Edward Said, as quoted in *A Space on the Side of the Road* (Princeton University Press, 1996), 64.
[10] Stewart, 65–66.

4

The story of the Koreans of Kazakhstan is often told as a story of deportation, a tragic story, a forgotten story, an untold story.[11] But this tendency to focus on recovering Stalinist terror and the tragic histories that come out of it, is to frame it too simply. And not only. To present this as a story about a distinct group of Koreans "Koryo Saram" that speak a unique dialect "Koryo mal" is to classify, to stress otherness, to create a museum piece of Koreanness, and ultimately to make less legible the many connections of this diaspora to others, to the fate of exile, to colonial occupation and the Korean liberation movement, its intersections with the Soviet socialist project, the complex geopolitics at work, and the crucial ways in which this story cannot be pinned down as separate and detached, as an isolated historical moment of displacement.[12]

Because of course this story is one displacement among many other displacements within a "constellation," in Walter Benjamin's sense, or an "atlas," as Aby Warburg envisioned it. That is, following Benjamin's critique of a historicism that "contents itself with establishing a causal connection between various moments in history," that tells "the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary," I seek to "grasp the constellation" of my time and yours and theirs, to restore "the future of its magic."[13] And I follow the lesson that Warburg imparts, a method of "setting in motion" the historical memory of images, "a knowledge-movement of images, a knowledge in extensions, in associative relationships, in ever renewed montages, and no longer knowledge in straight lines, in a confined corpus, in stabilized typologies."[14] To see what comes in the "collision of heterogeneous temporalities."[15] To "seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger."[16]

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[11] Of course it is all of these things, and my intention is not to make light of this narrative, but rather to create openings within it, to suggest something more. For portrayals of the dominant discourse, see the work of photographer Michael Vince Kim: https://www.thestoryinstitute.com/the-koreans-of-kazakhstan, the film by David Chung and Matt Dibble, *Koryo Saram: The Unreliable People*, 2006., and also some representative academic texts: German N. Kim and Ross King, eds., *Koryo Saram: Koreans in the Former USSR* (East Rock Institute, 2001); Alexander Diener, "Homeland as Social Construct: Territorialization among Kazakhstan's Germans and Koreans," *Nationalities Papers* 34, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 201–35; Michael Gelb, "An Early Soviet Ethnic Deportation: The Far-Eastern Koreans," *Russian Review* 54, no. 3 (July 1995): 389–412; J. Otto Pohl, *Ethnic Cleansing in the USSR, 1937-1949* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999); Haruki Wada, "Koreans in the Soviet Far East, 1917-1937," in *Koreans in the Soviet Union*, ed. Dae-sook Suh, Occasional Paper 12 (Honolulu: Center for Korean Studies, University of Hawaii, 1987), 24–59. I also include here my own early work, the outcome of my first research project, in which I sensed a "schism" but was not yet able to follow it, to configure it in the wake of rupture: "Vignettes of Identity: A Photographic Analysis of the Koryo Saram, 1932-1941" (Austin, University of Texas at Austin, 2010), https://repositories.lib.utexas.edu/handle/2152/ETD-UT-2010-05-1371.

[12] In this sense, the work of Пак Ир Петр Александрович / 박 일 sought to transcend the division of Koreanness in to a taxonomy. See the following transcription of an interview translated from Korean to English: https://koryo-saram.ru/avtobiografiya-pak-ira-petra-aleksandrovicha/

[13] See Thesis XVIII A and B in Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 263–64.

[14] Georges Didi-Huberman describes Warburg's Mnemosyne Atlas project as "an art history without a text" (11). His work approached the image as a "field of knowledge" in the form of a "knowledge-montage" (13). See "Knowledge: Movement" Huberman's foreword in Philippe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg and the Image in Motion*, trans. Sophie Hawkes (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

[15] Again from Didi-Huberman's foreword in Michaud, 12.

[16] This for Benjamin is the redemptive potential of historical materialism, "an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again" (255) that can "blast open the continuum of history" (262): See Theses II, V, VI, XVI, and XVII in Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

5

A scientist.
Born in Yakutsk. She escapes the fate of the 1937 deportation due to her father's political exile in the far reaches of Siberia.

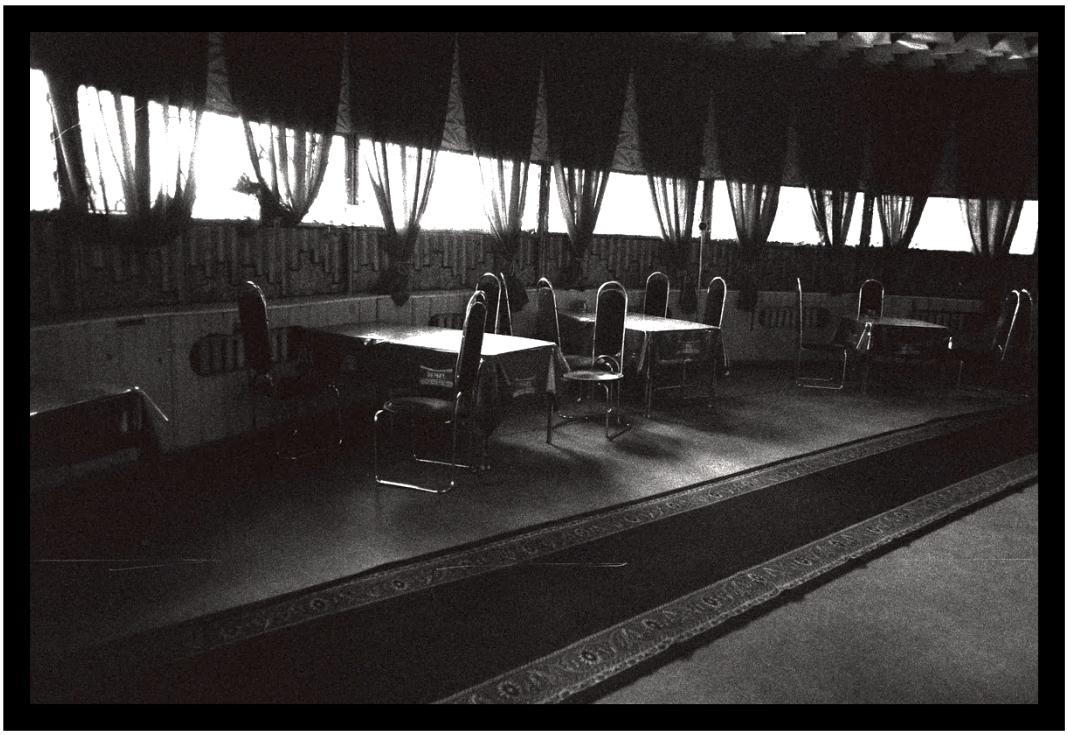
A writer.
Born in Pyongyang in 1960. He leaves for the Soviet Union with his mother and sister in 1961 leaving behind his father due to the growing political tensions between north Korea and the Soviet Union in light of Khrushchev's de-Stalinization.

A composer.
Born in Gwangju in 1923. He moves to Pyongyang after national liberation then continues his musical training in Moscow until taking political refuge in the Soviet Union in 1958 as part of "the group of 10" that condemned Kim Il Sung's rise to power.

A poet.
Born in North Hamgyong province (or is it the Russian Far East?). He receives his education in the Soviet Union before being deported to Central Asia in 1937 until his return to north Korea in 1945. He was killed in Pyongyang during a US air raid in 1951. One of his most famous poems is "Mt. Paektu," written in 1947.

A philosopher.
Born in the Russian Far East in 1911/1912 по документам. He is trained as a Marxist-Leninist philosopher and pedagogue. He is dispatched to north Korea in 1946 as part of the Soviet delegation of Koreans sent to help rebuild the newly socialist north. There, he teaches Kim Il Sung and Kim Tu-bong, serves as the first rector of what is now Kim Il Sung University, and upon his return to the Soviet Union, works to cultivate Korean language literary works, plays, and eastern philosophy within Soviet cultural life.

A writer in self-exile.
Born in 조선 in 1894. Is a founding member of KAPF / Korea Artista Proleta Federatio / 조선프롤레타예술가동맹 before leaving Korea for the Russian Far East in 1928. There he teaches at the Korean Pedagogical Institute in Vladivostok, and significantly contributes to the development of Korean proletariat literature. This is the only Korean language school in operation at the time. He is arrested in 1937 and is said to have died the following year in detention.



6

Я ни могу сказать точно, когда я первый раз слышал эту песню, но у меня есть впечатление…

It was just transmitted to me, as if it was passed from my mother's milk…

I wanted to revive these songs that no one knew how to sing anymore…

I would attend Korean weddings and there wouldn't be any Korean songs…

I wanted to bring back these 탈이 / народные песни, песни которые привезли из дальнего востока…[17]

The choir "Родина / homeland / 고향" was founded the year following the dissolution of the Soviet Union with financial and logistical support from the south Korean consulate in Almaty.[18] It is through my participation in the group's meetings, rehearsals, and performances that I come to recognize a memory through song, something previously foreclosed to me, that had always felt too impossibly distant.[19]

[17] 탈이 is sometimes also grouped together with 계몽기 가요 / enlightenment songs, shared across the north and south that express their connected histories.
[18] 신기철 was the first ambassador and is said to have named the choir.
[19] I thank the director of the choir Владимир Ильич Шин, musician and composer, my teacher and friend, who invited me to join the choir.

7

The first time I heard Манхянга / 망향가 /望鄕歌 it struck me in its strange, eerie familiarity. Uncanny, piercing, haunting, disorienting, it moved me, the way it conjured something I don't know and have never known, but that at once felt intensely familiar. Here is another description of an encounter with the song, from Central Asia:

> One night I had a dream about my childhood. My mother was sitting on a warm floor softly singing while mending something. I woke up, opened my eyes, and the melody was still lingering. And like this, the song stayed with me, resounding in my mind, following me everywhere. Most importantly though, it was a song I didn't know…The melody carried us like a whirlwind waltz to our distant, unknown, but nevertheless intimately cherished homeland. And we weren't the only ones who felt it. It's probably not just by chance that this waltz was most cherished by the elderly. And now I understand why. As the final notes fade away, it leaves a kind of aching sadness in my heart.[20]

Disorienting, as if a collision, a shock, a sudden flashing up, to recall again Benjamin. I felt it too. Манхянга / 망향가 / 望鄕歌 evokes unmappable distance, untamable longing, and impossibility because it is a song about home that circulated at a time when Korea was no longer Korea, when the political situation made it impossible to stay and impossible to return, when many found themselves in exile, when Korea was not yet divided, and when there was a sense of socialist solidarity and hope in the long struggle for independence that connected scattered diasporas across Russia, China, Manchuria, Japan, and as far as the US and Latin America.

The song's origins are sketchy.[21] But what rises to the surface in following its movements is that the work of pinning it down, figuring out where it comes from or when or what it is called, is not as crucial as recognizing the distant intimacy of its illegibility.[22] It presences in sound, image, sensation less a place and more a time that exists in absent presence as an "elsewhere." Like Lisa Stevenson, I also take "song" as "an invocation that depends less on words per se and more on voice as a kind of gesture."[23]

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[20] This is my translation, the Russian original reads: И вот однажды ночью приснился мне сон из далекого детства. Мама, сидя на теплом полу, что-то латала и тихо напевала песню. Я проснулся, открыл глаза, а мелодия продолжала звучать в моей голове. Мелодия эта уже не покидала меня. Она следовала за мной везде. Самое главное - она не была незнакомой… Мелодия сама по себе уносила нас вихрем вальса в далекую, неведомую, но такую близкую для нас страну. И не только мы это чувствовали. Этот вальс, наверное, не случайно, особенно нравился людям пожилого возраста. И теперь я понимаю почему. Смолкали последние звуки, а на сердце оставалась какая-то щемящая грусть" (143). The passage is from an essay by Kim Ge Ro / Ким Ге Ро, see "'Коремаль' и Второе Рождение Песни 'Манхянга,'" *Ариран 1937*, no. 2 (2017). https://koryo-saram.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Ariran-1937-2-Tekst-s-oblozhkoj.pdf

[21] It said to be a Japanese song composed by Хоцуми Танака / 다나까 호즈미 that made its way to the Russian Far East, where the self-exiled proletariat writer 조명희 wrote Korean lyrics to the melody in the version that exists to this day. The Japanese version was called Beauty of Nature / Прекрасны мир / 천연의 미. There have also been connections made to a poem written by a Japanese Korean (Кё Новуко?) in 1900. See 김보희, 소비에트 시대 고려인 소인예술단의 음악활동 (파주시: 한울 아카데미, 2009); 채록, 편저 김병학, 채보, 편곡 한 야꼬브, and 기획, 감수 김준태, 재소고려인의 노래를 찾아서, vol. 1 (서울시: 화남, 2007).

[22] To even begin tracing its movements, one must know Russian, Korean, and Classical Chinese.

[23] See Chapter 6 "Song" in *Life Beside Itself* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2014), 157. Song, or "sound image," as Lisa Stevenson calls it, "can be a way of conjuring up a life that is very much 'beside itself'" (16). I too am "less concerned with naming per se…less concerned with what is said and more with the fact that something is said, that a gesture is made or a song sung" (158). Perhaps where I depart from her company is that song in this

The members of the choir learned Korean songs like the Манхянга / 망향가/ 望鄕歌 through Russian transliteration. A focus on sound rather than meaning. It's something everyone is always very aware of, that they cannot read or speak Korean, that the language of their homeland / 모국어 was ultimately lost to many of them, but it is crucial that the sounds are still transmitted. Мы не говорим по корейский, мы потеряли свой язык, they would say, yet the voice remains as an absent present contact, a symbol of their dis-connection to Korea, their "re-membering" of Korea mediated through Russian and their identities as Советские люди as they navigate the political terrain of postsocialist Kazakhstan.[24] This intimate distant relation to home is of course not lost on me, as I have also spent most of my life elsewhere, always inhabiting simultaneously an attachment to and illegibility of Korea. That I had to go all the way to Central Asia to encounter this song in an opaque rendering of sounds, that which powerfully evoked something, elucidated for me the affective potential latent in this gesture.

Most people don't call this song by its name or even know the name because it is usually referred to by its opening line Гогук санчон / 고국 산천.[25] Because everyone learned these songs in oral form, as their mothers and grandmothers sang them, the songs were passed down by memory and feel, and they were prone to change, distortion, and reinterpretation, parts forgotten or remembered differently.

The musician and composer Яков Хан explains that this was one of the biggest challenges as he worked on the grand two volume collection of Koryo Saram folk songs with 김병학.[26] They spent years going from village to village collecting these old songs, but when they tried to pin down the melodies, to transcribe the notes, there were many instances when the sound would vibrate between the actually existing notes or when the lyrics weren't articulated clearly. So how then to express the melody as notes, and how then to write the song that every person remembered in their own way? In some ways, the 망향가 is a song without an author, and in this sense it is truly a народная песня. It is collective yet individual.[27]

Svetlana Boym presents nostalgia as less about longing for a place, and more about longing for a time, a different time. And in this nostalgic poetics of song, it is the senses that trigger things: "The nostalgic had an amazing capacity for remembering sensations, tastes, sounds, smells, the minutiae and trivia of the lost paradise that those who remained home never noticed," and so in a sense, the nostalgic can never be "a native but a displaced person who mediates between the local and the universal."[28] Again, rupture, loss, is inherent to the existence of home. In the sensuous experience of song, the senses mobilized as a kind of conductor of memory, another Korea of the past and future can be encountered, opened up in all of its impossible possibility, a "return without a departure."[29]

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instance is less about "seeking someone, calling someone, singing to someone" that is attached to a name or person or relation, and more about the reanimation of a certain time or moment as well as the aesthetics and poetics of that memory manifesting itself in a moment of confrontation (163).

[24] The notion of "re-membering" follows Kathleen Stewart, as in attending to the ways in which forgetting and re-membering are "constitutive elements of the story itself." See *A Space on the Side of the Road*, 7.

[25] 고국산천 / Гогук Санчён / 故國山川 invokes the mountains and rivers of one's distant homeland.

[26] 채록, 편저 김병학, 채보, 편곡 한 야꼬브, and 기획, 감수 김준태, 재소고려인의 노래를 찾아서.

[27] Many thanks to Яков Хан for his time and for helping me find my way into this song.

[28] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 4, 12.

[29] Boym, 352.

This could encompass a return to the moment of immense hope in the post-liberation period when members of the Soviet Korean intelligentsia were dispatched to north Korea to help build communism. But it would also inevitably include its many tragic outcomes, of families divided, accumulated grief and unresolved *han*, that are necessarily part of that Korean memory.[30]

What is contained is not memory in the sense of "a property of consciousness" but memory as a "quality that distinguishes living from dead matter," so for instance, a seed has a memory because it knows when to sprout, it remembers this from a past life, as does a song that has the capacity to transmit an emotion from another time.[31] It is a memory that

> has the capacity to react to an event over a period of time; that is, a form of preserving and transmitting energy not known to the physical world. Any event affecting living matter leaves a trace which Semon calls an '*engram*.' The potential energy conserved in this "engram" may, under suitable conditions, be reactivated and discharged—we then say the organism acts in a specific way because it remembers the previous event.[32]

If this song can be an engram in the way Warburg envisioned for his atlas, as the "crystallization of an energetic charge and an emotional experience" then it is in the singing, in the voicing, and presencing of its melody that opens up the possibility of releasing that energetic charge.[33]

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[30] *Han*/한 is described by Richard Roy Grinker as a concept that "expresses both personal and collective losses, violations, and consequent resentment" (74) and in this sense it is "a shared consciousness" that brings to light relations to one another, the past, and the future (78) See Ch 4 "Loss, Mourning, and Resentment: Han" in *Korea and Its Futures*.My understanding of this *han* inflected history comes in fragments, from conversations and writings of friends and acquaintances who lived this history, that I had the privilege of participating in, listening to, reading and responding to over a long span of years, from 2008 to the present. See in particular an essay by Alexander Kan / Александр Кан, "Над темной водой": https://koryo-saram.ru/aleksandr-kan-nad-tyomnoj-vodoj-esse-ob-ottse/. I also draw from the digitized archives housed at the Library of Congress that holds some 80 biographies of the Soviet Korean figures who were dispatched to the DPRK, and a collective memoir that documents the experiences and recollections of the descendants of this group, many who still reside in Central Asia (not in circulation). The Library of Congress materials are described in the following way: "These are biographies of 80 Soviet-Korean (Koryo Saram) leaders, who were sent to North Korea by the Soviet Communist Party in the mid-1940s to help establish and administer the North Korean government and North Korean institutions…in the autumn of 1958, the first arrests of Soviet Koreans took place, including the former chief of staff in the North Korean Navy and deputy Prime minister of the DPRK…These manuscripts will shed light on several questions regarding when, how, what, and who played a major role in the establishment of the North Korean state" https://www.loc.gov/rr/asian/SovietKorean.html.

[31] I am drawing from Giorgio Agamben's essay that follows the development of Warburg's thought, influenced by Richard Semon's book *Mneme* according to Ernst Gombrich, Warburg's biographer. See "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," 93–94. See also Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography with a Memoir on the History of the Library by F. Saxl* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

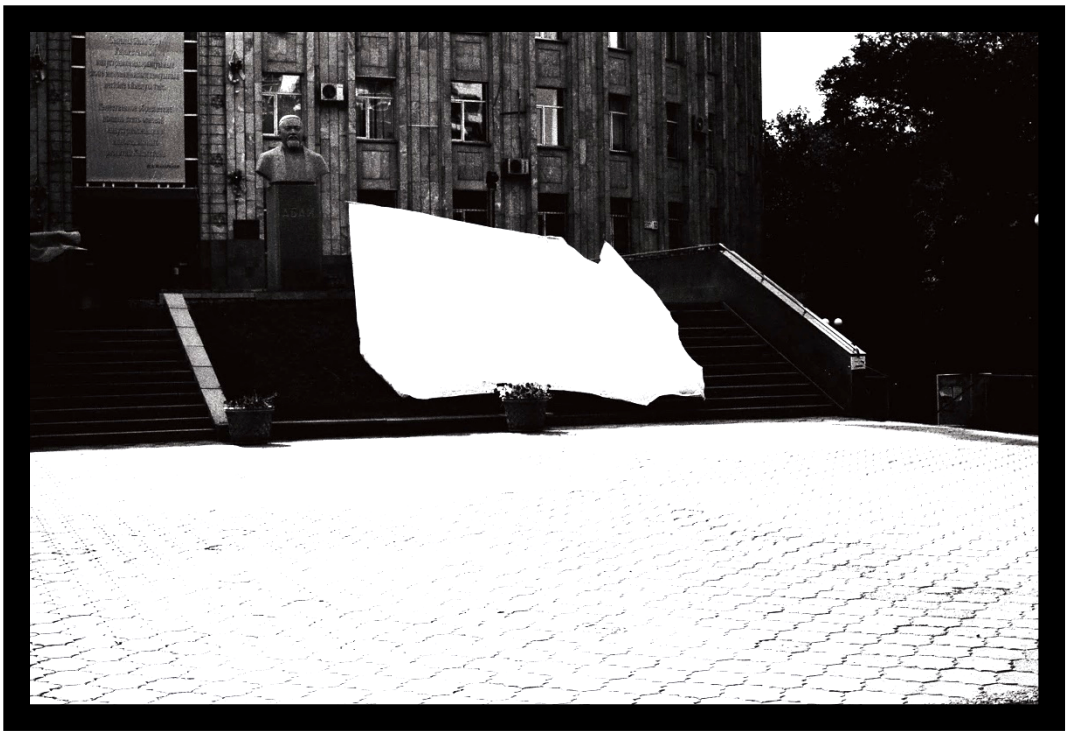
[32] Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science," 93–94.

[33] Agamben, 94.

To sing, to voice, is then to stir up and agitate "the sedimented material…of an unconscious memory," at once individual and social.[34] The "voice-presence" is what occupies space, is what occupies the "time between," is the message.[35]

[34] See Georges Didi-Huberman, *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art*, trans. Harvey Mendelsohn (Penn State University Press, 2016), 198. The risk in this "confrontation," however is that its reception can be "lethal or vitalizing, depending on the situation—with the tremendous energies storied in images, which in themselves had the potential either to make man regress into sterile subjection or to direct him on his path toward salvation and knowledge" (94). See Agamben, "Aby Warburg and the Nameless Science." Boym's articulation of nostalgia is similar, it can be "both a social disease and a creative emotion, a poison and a cure" (354). This is the difference between her notion of "restorative" and the "reflective," yet they coexist in the form of a double exposure. In this space of overlap produced by the double exposure, that contains common "frames of reference" and that can mobilize "the same triggers of memory and symbols," the one can be mistaken for the other (49). See *The Future of Nostalgia*.

[35] A poem re-rendered, see Cha, *Exilée*, 24–25.



8

The north and south are like our parents, and if the north is our father and the south is our mother and they are separated, it's impossible to ask which one we love more. That's how we feel about the two sides.[36]

From Kazakhstan, this is a possible way to imagine the relationship between north and south Korea. That is, the north is inseparable from the south, and one side cannot be forsaken for the other, for their histories and futures are inextricably tied. There are no boundaries placed between north and south because there is a collective sensibility that transcends the idea of north and south, that places less emphasis on place because the memory, the connection, is the only way to this faraway time.[37]

[36] I would like to thank 남경자 선생님, the Korean language editor and Константин Ким, Editor in Chief of the newspaper *Koryo Ilbo* for this insight. The lineage of the Koryo Ilbo dates as far back as 1924-1937 when it was established in the Russian Far East as *Sonbong* / 선봉 (Vanguard), then reestablished after the deportation in Kyzlorda in 1938 as *Lenin Kichi* / 레닌기치 (The Banner of Lenin), then to its current name in 1991. This perspective is in tension with the idea that Kazakhstan is a site of "confrontation" between north and south, whereby the "ethnic Korean diaspora becomes an interface along the political and cultural frontline dividing the two Koreas." See Eunsil Yim, "Confronting Korean Identities in Post-Soviet Kazakhstan," in *De-Bordering Korea: Tangible and Intangible Legacies of the Sunshine Policy* (Routledge, 2013). My approach takes up the notion of "confrontation" differently, as a site of encounter and possibility rather than competition or hostility.

[37] My gratitude to Сергей Геннадиевич Огай, Vice President of the Association of the Koreans of Kazakhstan (АКК) in 2016, Борис Духенович Ким a prominent figure in ASOK/Котон рён, and Николай Хваенович Ким for helping me navigate this complex landscape.

9

"Korea" is a word that erases the history of Korea.

Not only because it cannot distinguish between the local designations of "north" and "south," but also because these terms cannot account for the condition of exile and displacement that is the story of modern Korea.[38]

So the writer 포석 조명희, if he left "Korea" before the division and died in exile, is he "north Korean" or is he "south Korean" or perhaps just "Korean"? Because back then, Korea had a different name, 조선 / Chosun, so there is no "Korea" that can include him, leaving the idea of Korea emptied. Or what about the "Soviet" Koreans, many of whom migrated to the Russian Far East long before the colonial era? Or the divided families on both sides of the border? The English word glosses over all of this.

[38] And with this, I return to the idea of dis-location that opens the dissertation.


КАРАВАН
2017

10

Alma-Ata.

It is raining.

She knows she is dying.

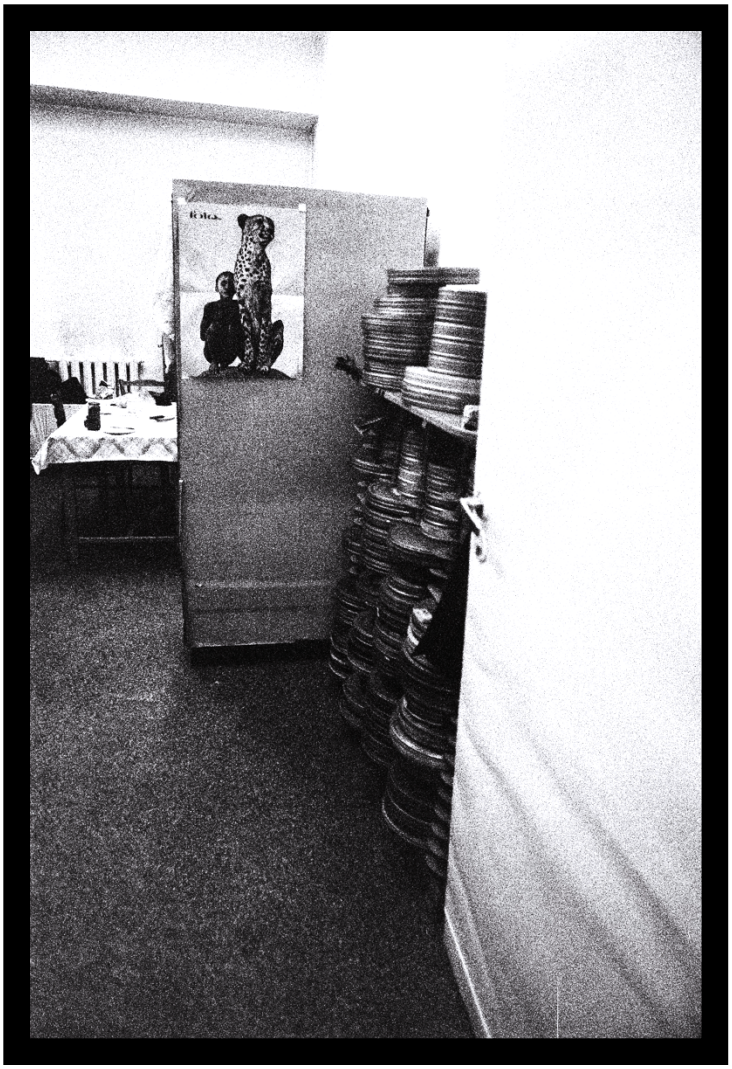
A mother is going through the Korean traditional funeral rites with her daughter Katyusha, of writing one's name on a piece of red silk, of the garments that should be worn, of washing the body, of combing the hair, of closing the eyes and the mouth of the deceased.

She wonders whether there is a word for the place where one dies, like there is a word for the place where one is born. There must be, how can there not be? It should be as tender and as sorrowful, so that the heart aches when one says it.

She is going through the funeral rites at first in Russian, then suddenly in Korean, to her daughter who doesn't know a word of Korean. The mother is speaking, and the daughter is unable to understand, and she is distraught, not only because she doesn't understand the words, but because she is confronted with the loss of a world.

As the mother dies, she utters her last words "Как же называется тот край…"[39]

[39] From a short story called "Как называется тот край…" by the writer Han Jin / 한진 (한대용) / Хан Дин. The story was included in the edited volume: Пак Михаил, *Звено Нежности: Рассказы и Повести Корейских Писателей* (Алматы: Гылым, 1994). The mother's last words conjure a place that cannot be named, a place that is before name, without name, or between name, which is inspired in part by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's poem Exilée. See *Exilée*, 34. "Korea," in this sense, is less a home that is a place, but something more metaphysical and spiritual in a realm beyond the modern conception of history as teleology.



EPILOGUE /
POSTSOCIALIST ENCYCLOPEDIA

From the side of lights to the other side of fleeting grays. How did gray come to symbolize the defunct past of a bygone era? Has the dream of socialist industry completely crumbled? Is the dream of concrete infrastructures, the dream of 5-year plans, the dream of accomplishing the impossible now in tatters? Has the glimmer dulled or is it now a different dream? How to locate factory gray, cement gray, kommunalka gray, khrushevka gray, the gray of industrial modernity and the future, the gray with a cerulean sheen?

These are the questions that come to mind from a broken bridge that no longer connects the Chinese city of Dandong to the north Korean city of Sinuiju. There are other working bridges, but the colors of communism can only be seen from the broken one.

This is a curious border. It turns looking into a pilgrimage, a family outing, a romantic stroll along the promenade. Chinese tourists are dressing up in north Korean 치마저고리, taking ice-cream selfies, drinking north Korean beer, and buying socialist tchotchkes from across the Yalu River. Anthropologists are peering through binoculars to see what they can see. Journalists come to write the truth about it all. But the thing is, there is not much to see at this border. You can't find answers to anything. Because what is most compelling is not what is visible, but the nature of that which appears so defunct and gray, looking from one socialism to another. What is it that tempers this molten metal? There are still flecks of red swirling around the inside.

The rupture of the socialist project is perhaps not a thing to be understood, but more a thing to be felt, in rumblings, repetitions, dilations, and reverberations. Because rupture, of course, is not an event with a discrete beginning and end that can be ceremoniously affixed to the temporality of "post."

There is an impossible dimension to rupture, its structure akin to a dream in the realm of the image where the logic of time and space are scrambled and where there is no before or after, only detours and returns. In *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* Susan Buck-Morss, like Walter Benjamin before her, performs this work, rescuing "the past in fragments" and sifting through the "disparate images" left in the aftermath of rupture.[1] Katherine Verdery describes rupture as the reconfiguration of a world, a cosmic loss of the socialist universe of meaning. How, then, to reconfigure, to make sense of morality, work, money, friendship, time?[2] How to think rupture not just as break but also continuity? The editors of the volume *Afterlives of Chinese Communism* take up these lingering questions, the energies and futures past of the Chinese communist project to reencounter Maoist sociality, communist thought, revolutionary consciousness—the socialist world, another political reality.[3]

They say,
"How China's revolutionary century is viewed depends to a large degree on one's mode of relation to it: does one look back on it with nostalgia, horror, or ambivalence? Does one turn to it

[1] Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe*, 41.
[2] Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 35.
[3] Christian Sorace, Ivan Franceschini, and Nicholas Loubere, eds., *Afterlives of Chinese Communism: Political Concepts from Mao to Xi* (Austrailian National University Press and Verso, 2019).

out of political fidelity, historical curiosity, or morbid fascination? To approach the Chinese Revolution is to stand in relation to it, and *to feel something toward it.*"[4]

I turn to writing in order to enact a mode of relation, to incite a feeling. The work of this dissertation comes from this sentiment too, recognizing that conjuring and reinhabiting another political reality requires experiments in writing to get at a language, forms of expression that can embody the affect, aesthetics, and nostalgic distance of that world. It is this vision that titles the epilogue "Postsocialist Encyclopedia."[5]

This encyclopedia would assemble "objects" at a limit, like the Chinese Encyclopedia that opens *The Order of Things*.[6] It would be a list, a taxonomy, a compendium of feeling that becomes a site of encounter, something between and within the ruptures and continuities of the befores and afters of socialism.

[4] Sorace, Franceschini, and Loubere, 3.
[5] "Postsocialist Encyclopedia" is a collaborative project that I am developing with Annie Malcolm. Our first co-authored paper was presented under the same name at the AAA meetings in 2019.
[6] Here Foucault is drawing from a Borges story that "quotes a 'certain Chinese encyclopaedia'" in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (Vintage Books, 1970), xv.

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