

Impossible Speech: The Politics of Representation in Contemporary Korean Literature and Film by Christopher P. Hanscom. New York: Columbia University Press, 2024. viii, 225 pp.

When and how does the speech act become political, and on whose authority? If the speaker operates or transgresses outside the framework of expected or demanded authenticity, how does the audience make sense of that which could not have been foreseen or was previously excluded from the commonly agreed upon category of the “real”? Christopher P. Hanscom’s *Impossible Speech: The Politics of Representation in Contemporary Korean Literature and Film* addresses these and other questions related to *who gets to speak* and the significance of speech acts by both fictional characters and real-life individuals, whose subjectivity has been misappropriated and misunderstood and whose voices have been silenced. *Impossible Speech* is a unique intervention into current understandings of contemporary South Korean cultural productions in that it prioritizes the voices and experiences of various underrepresented groups, including migrant workers, victims of government atrocities, North Korean escapees and defectors, those who are homeless, those who socially isolate, and those with mental illness. Such an intervention exposes a more complex reality than that which is given based on mere linguistic commonality, expected assumptions, or governmental or medical arbitration, which all stand in for different kinds of “common sense.” To counter this, Hanscom aims to go beyond the limits of so-called common sense and articulate “impossible speech”: “[It] signals a language that is understood to be unsayable, a contradiction in terms that points to the way in which the unsayable is necessarily seen as such in advance” (10). *Impossible Speech* explores that contradiction by examining limits of speech placed on individuals and the ways in which they navigate and transgress those limitations to reveal systems of power that operate on the level of language and communication.

Chapter 1, “The Return of the Real in South Korean Fiction,” highlights the issue of monolingualism and its fantasy in an ever-globalizing South Korea. The recent works *Sea and Butterfly* by Kim Insuk, *The Elephant* by Kim Jae-young (Kim Jaeyoung), and *Brown Tears* by Kang Young-sook (Gang Yeongsuk) are categorized as contemporary migrant fiction. In these texts, one can imagine how South Korea’s neoliberal capitalist system clashes with the established Korean concept of *minjung* (common people), which itself signals an ethnonational approach to working class issues. In this light, given the shared economic status of the workers, yet only a *presumed* language overlap, combined with racial difference, Hanscom describes the situations of these migrant workers as the

anxiety of sameness/difference (37). By choosing texts with characters such as a Korean in China, a child of a Chinese Korean mother and a Nepalese father, and a Sri Lankan woman (to name a few), he brilliantly strings together an argument that shines a light on the challenges and façade of South Korean multiculturalism, which arguably masks a monolithic monolingualism. These texts work to define and defy such limitations placed on migrant workers.

Chapter 2, “Displacing the Common Sense of Trauma: Han Kang’s *A Boy Is Coming*,” places the 2014 novel at the center of its focus. The novel is a fictional retelling of the uprising and subsequent massacre of civilians in Gwangju in 1980. Hanscom opens the chapter with a discussion of speeches given by President Moon Jae-in in 2019, on the thirty-ninth anniversary of what is now referred to as the Gwangju Democratization Movement, and 2020. These speeches were attempts to set the record straight and to memorialize the brutal events so that proper healing could commence. However, Hanscom argues that this over-and-done-with approach to history is challenged in Han’s novel. He reveals the novel’s refusal to make sense of the act perpetrated by the South Korean government. Impossible speech works in this novel by articulating non-sense because the tragedy should have never occurred in the first place, making speech *about it* non-sensical. It is ironically fitting, then, that one of the main characters—a victim and witness of state violence—is, in fact, dead, working against any official logic from the outset. “Thus,” writes Hanscom, “*Boy* gives us a double scandal: resurrecting the silent from their documentary grave against the realist for whom the dead must remain dead, and stubbornly representing the impossibility of witness against the historian who would fix the meaning of Gwangju through an accumulation of testimony and fact” (83). He is convincing in his stance that Han’s novel is not just a re-opening of the Gwangju massacre; it was an event that must never align with common sense and therefore must never be closed.

Narratives of North Koreans—both real and fictional—are the focus of the third chapter, “Fabricating the Real: Accounting for North Korea in Escapee Narratives and in Fiction.” Hanscom points out that the blurred line between the two can be articulated as a problem of the speech act. He addresses the common Western approach to North Korea as one that works mainly on assumptions, and skillfully employs Adam Johnson’s 2012 novel *The Orphan Master’s Son* (thought by some to be nonfiction) alongside actual escapee accounts to demonstrate how certain narratives are demanded or expected from anything about North Korea to maintain the nation’s status as enigmatic. Framed within international human rights discourse, on the one hand in escapee narratives, “The subject is ... depoliticized,” but at the same time is subjected to

“the logic of identification—wherein the witness corresponds exactly with the text and disappears” (89). These narratives must not be too stereotypical so as to be uninteresting to the reading public, nor must they be too traumatic, violent, or unexpected, so as to not be believable. On the other hand, Hanscom writes, Johnson’s novel challenges this identification via the logic of naming, which “allows the emergence of a subject ‘between nominations’” (89). Such a process reveals “the limits of referentiality” and leaves involuntary speech to balance on “the precarious edge between the factual and the factitious” (89–90). Given common receptions and representations of North Korean narratives, Hanscom offers a fresh and welcome approach to accounts of and from the reclusive nation.

Finally, two films are the focus of chapter 4, “Disturbing Sensibility: Transgressing Generic Norms in *Castaway on the Moon* and *I’m a Cyborg, but That’s OK*.” A suicidal castaway and a *hikikomori* (Japanese for social recluse) in *Castaway* and occupants of a mental asylum in *Cyborg* are the main subjects in these films. Focusing on transgressions of space and therefore how the “possible meanings of [a] subject’s speech” (124) may be interpreted, this chapter works through the (almost) coming together of alienated individuals who exist outside of national or medical bounds, not to fulfill “narratives of love and cure—arcs of redemption” (148), but to disrupt such narratives. Both stories do not contain happy endings, and in fact their characters are arguably kept from each other by various forces. But, Hanscom argues, that is part of the point: “Their stories are not woven into familiar narratives and thus made familiar in their difference—the operation of the realist text—but rather insist on a sustained difference within the apparently familiar” (147). Hanscom is convincing further in his argument that full reintegration of these characters back into society would cause their own erasure. Such uncomfortable endings instead push the limits of the sayable and expose the possibilities of the impossible.

Impossible Speech offers much about contemporary South Korean cultural productions to scholars, students, and the average reader/viewer alike. As South Korea continues to market its cultural productions globally and accept more and more people from varying backgrounds, races, and nationalities, issues of speech, language, and the authority that operates within these two categories must be addressed. If we are to take anything from this insightful work, it is that there is value in working outside predictive realms of cultural productions as pre-given political objects. Instead, to work from the realm of speech as an act of transgression, perseverance, or resistance—especially those prefigured to be impossible—is to open up possibilities never before imagined and to give

voice to those who have been silenced.

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