

Worm-Time: Memories of Division in South Korean Aesthetics by We Jung Yi. Cornell University Press, 2024. 268 pp.

Ambitious in scope and analytically rigorous, *Worm-Time* is a thought-provoking intervention in the study of haunting memories of the Korean War that have persisted in South Korean cultural production over the span of almost seven decades. By focalizing “wormified subjects,” those who have been consistently silenced, violated, underrepresented, and yet resiliently surviving—and at times refusing to comply—in South Korean history of dictatorship, state violence, and neoliberal economic hardship, We Jung Yi demonstrates how victims of historical violence, “worms” (*pölle* in Korean), transform themselves into “resilient agents riding Cold War borders” (8) across generations and media. In this regard, the wormified subjects’ border riding is crucial for understanding how their witnessing of violent times, which Yi calls “worm-time,” yields the aesthetic possibility of such transformations. Attending to the ways in which border-riding agency manifests through their “translation of memory,” Yi offers a compelling and refreshing reading of texts not conventionally discussed together in studies of the cultural representation of collective trauma related to the Korean War.

Besides the innovative concept of the transmemory of worm-like humans, which complicates aesthetic interventions into the generational trauma of the war, *Worm-Time* stands out for a number of reasons. First, its unusual combination of canonical and contemporary popular cultural texts, as well as literary and visual aesthetics, presents a new possibility to think about Cold War imaginaries of the division that bring generations of readers and audiences into conversation. The simultaneity and seamlessness of Yi’s in-depth interpretations are highly effective in identifying the interlocking issues that concern all worm-like humans in South Korea. Second, and as an extension of the first point, the combination speaks directly to what this book aims to achieve: the transgressive energy that rises from the margins, or from “border riders,” as Yi calls them, both in terms of aesthetics as well as artists’ positionality across gender, class, and age. Third, its suspicion toward the dominant Cold War framework of the United States versus the Soviet Union does not remain mere intellectual rhetoric; rather, it persistently brings readers down to the level of worms to see how localized memories of the war place pressure on the representational power of the imperial West.

Organized in three parts, each consisting of two chapters, in Part I *Worm-Time* traces the emergence of South Korean division literature (*pundan munhak*) in the 1960s and 1970s. Chapter 1 reads one of the most canonical division literary texts, Ch’oe Inhun’s *The Square*, by redirecting existing scholarship on

the work toward the frustrated desire for freedom embodied in the body of the male protagonist, Myōng-jun, while paralleling women's mobile bodies. Chapter 2 expands the gendered aesthetics of traumatic memory of the war through readings of Pak Wansō's works, notably *Who Ate Up All the Shinga?* and *The Naked Tree*, which, as Yi argues, depart from the dominant trend in Korean War literature centered on the "innocent eyes of boys" (42). Pak disrupts the male-centered representations characteristic of division literature by foregrounding lived experiences of survival that profoundly challenge the patriarchal nationalism embedded in the political and economic structures of the division system.

Part II analyzes two most radical shifts in division aesthetics: *minjung* literature and post-Sunshine Policy cinema. Chapter 3 reads Jo Jung Rae's *T'aebaek Mountain Range*, one of the most important works that highlight the revolutionary agency of the masses (*minjung*). Yi's interest lies in the work's "dialogic minjung imagination" (77), particularly in its representation of peasants who were wormified by the historical forces of colonialism and the Korean War. Chapter 4 examines the post-Sunshine Policy-era blockbuster films such as *Shiri*, *JSA*, and *Welcome to Dongmakgol*. Reading these texts against the backdrop of global cultural flows, Yi demonstrates how transmemory is spectacularized for both domestic and global audiences and how the depiction of heterogeneous witnesses has "broadened the potential for mass-mediated sharing of localized experiences of wormification" (123).

Chapter 5 in Part III examines wormified youth in neoliberal South Korea, who are labeled "surplus" (*ingyō*) in two webtoons, *Secretly, Greatly* and *Duty After School*, by superimposing youth sensibilities onto their surplus status and the continuing reality of division in contemporary Korea. The final chapter, on *Operation Chromite*, circles back to postcolonial time-space as imagined by an artist, Yoon Taeho, who has no direct experience of Japanese colonialism or the Korean War. As Yi argues, the ingenuity of the webtoon lies in its portrayal of multiple wormified subjects bearing witness while struggling to survive in a time of violence. In doing so, it enables audiences to engage with the ongoing reality of division, in which the mass killings of civilians remain unresolved.

Yi's transmemory approach is generative in shedding light on the agency of the worm-humans, and her close reading of the selected texts adds depth to the analytical power of the worm's-eye view metaphor. Her skillful movement across diverse aesthetic forms, as well as across time and space, allows the book to maintain its thematic focus throughout. I would also add that the visual images from the webtoons included in Part III are especially helpful in enabling readers to follow Yi's careful reading of webtoon aesthetics. *Worm-Time* is a significant contribution to Cold War studies, memory studies, division literature,

and media studies. It is essential reading for researchers and students of Korean studies seeking to deepen their understanding of the cultural representation of collective trauma rooted in colonialism, Cold War geopolitics, state violence, and neoliberal capitalism.

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