

Towards an Eco-Material Repository: Representations of Trauma in Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the representations of historical and generational trauma in Han Kang's 2021 novel *We Do Not Part* through the primary lens of material ecocriticism. The study excavates an eco-material archive of history from Kang's work, contending that the landscape bore witness to the Jeju massacre of 1948 and its bloody aftermath, presenting an alternate account of the events that de-centers official records. The motifs of black logs, snow, and the two pet birds function as ecological metaphors in the novel to remember and narrate what has largely been repressed by state-enforced amnesia. More than passive symbols, Kang's treatment of them as agential matter animates the otherwise dormant local geography of Inseon's village with a trans-corporeality that both disrupts and supplements the narrative by rupturing human consciousness. In conclusion, the paper analyses how landscapes themselves become sites and means of recollection and articulation of trauma rather than merely staging the psychological processes that constitute re-memory, supplying the gaps in human memory and testimony.

Keywords: Han Kang, Eco-materialism, Post-memory, Historical trauma, Transcorporeality.

Introduction

Han Kang's *We Do Not Part*, now considered her magnum opus by many, is a work that is at once autobiographical and autofictional. It narrates the story of Kyungha, a writer who is perpetually troubled by

nightmares since she began working on her book on the 1980 Gwangju massacre, and subsequently undertakes a perilous journey to Jeju Island on her friend Inseon's request to care for her pet bird. What confronts her at Inseon's home, however, is another haunting dream that rifts through her fabric of reality, unveiling the wounds left by another brutal period of Korean history- that of the Jeju Massacre.

The Storying of Memory

Kyungha, as the novel opens with a dream she has a couple of months after her book's release, is introduced to the readers as an accidental, almost unwilling witness to an unbidden history. The colossal effort of composing her previous work has left her estranged from family, suffering from depression and insomnia and an inability to stomach most food. And yet, hers is "a body desiring to live" (8), a desire that strives to tell a story- one that initially does not seem her own but, as we shall gradually see, is in fact her own history.

Upon the insistence of the dream in her life, wherein she's the sole witness to the swallowing of the graves by the sea, unable to "move them to safety" (6), Kyungha takes matters into her own hands. She envisages a project- a ritualistic burial- that would allow her to take control of what she fails at in the dream. The planting of logs in snow and their documentation in a short film, she thinks, as an act of preservation and commemoration, would finally exorcise her of the nightmares the publication of her book could not. But the project never comes to fruition, even when Inseon urges her, having begun work on collecting and shaping the logs herself. The "constant deferral" (32) on Kyungha's part to enact the burial suggests an indefinite deferral of closure itself. She cannot bury what she has not yet fully come to terms with. Kyungha's journey, thus, through the course of the book, is also one of taking the responsibility of

witnessing, recording and relaying. She must undertake the painful yet indispensable work of re-membering as the weight of the past bears down with its stubborn presence in the characters' lives.

The novel is divided into three sections, each of which indicates a subtle shift in consciousness through nested narratives of Kyungha, Inseon and her mother. As it progresses, the events of the novel progressively transcend to a dreamscape, indicating the impossibility of historical reportage through the disorienting frames, achronological narration and the hallucinatory magic realism of the prose. The work flits between journalistic reporting in the form of a montage of remembered conversations, interviews and Inseon's short films and the difficulty of the very act of recollecting and narrating trauma.

As opposed to the patriarchal state's official accounts of the battlefields and quelling of dissent, Kang is interested in tracing the events through a female lineage of the trauma it entails. Each of Inseon's triptych of short films- on Vietnam, Manchuria and Jeju- abide by this methodology of centering women survivors and recording their testimonies of surviving not only human-made atrocities, but also the wrath of nature.

As a survivor's child, Inseon has inherited from her mother a catastrophic history, albeit not through direct recollection but through postmemories that haunt her entire existence (Hirsch, 2008). It is through twice-passed conversations, first from a mother to her daughter, and then between friends, that the past is narrated, and each of these transferences gives way to new stories. This access to the past is paved by "imaginative investment, projection, and creation" (107). Kyungha is only able to access Inseon's collection of boxes that contain her research on the events of 1948, along with her uncle's letters and other pieces of information gathered by her mother, when Inseon herself appears in a dreamlike reality to shake her awake to the truth. To readers, it is unclear whose dream it is, if it is one at all. When Kyungha realizes that she

might be losing her friend too, one can only wonder if it is because Inseon has passed away at the hospital in Seoul or because Kyungha's injury from the fall has proved fatal. She confesses to Inseon that the dream about the tree trunks engulfed by the tide revealed to her the humiliating truth of her personal life- that she had no one left. Personal and collective histories collide, and the women reach out to each other to continue their story. The story entails an "encounter with another," as Caruth points out (8). The dream, as Lacan says, "is an act of homage to the missed reality" (qtd. in Caruth, 105) to awaken from which is "to bear the imperative to survive... as the one who must tell *what it means not to see*" (ibid.).

Trauma and its Long Duree

Following Iovino and Oppermann, Ostups (2024) notes that "matter is storied... a space of inherent historicity" (73). This strand of eco-materialist thought pushes literature past the epistemological crisis of narrating trauma where nature too is "agentic" (Alaimo, 4-5) and human and non-human "material forms... intra-act with each other... producing configurations of meanings and discourses that we can interpret as stories" (Iovino & Oppermann, 7). In *We Do Not Part*, the landscape is the text that replaces the official documents of historical recordkeeping. Away from Seoul's state-controlled archives, Kyungha arrives in Jeju to uncover a spatial and material archive of the events of 1948, made possible by a "witnessing after the human" (Richardson and Zolkos, 2022) in circumstances where history itself is traumatic (Caruth, 15).

Snow, both in Kyungha's dreams and outside, plays a dual role. It has a quality of "unreality" to it, just as it also provides clarity. It is both a preserver and a destroyer- at once keeping the bodies of the dead intact while also erasing footprints by burying them under thick layers of fresh snowfall. At several instances, Kyungha meditates upon the lightness of snowflakes. And yet, accumulated, snow pummels her to the ground and causes trees to collapse under its weight. Snow also acts as an insulator- as is evident

from the Manchurian woman's short film- literally keeping her warm inside. Metaphorically, this insulation is what leaves Kyungha practically stranded in the village, unable to go back and forced to reckon with decades of hushed grief.

In its "unfathomably slow descent" (Kang, 60), snow evokes deep time and the planetary memories it folds in itself and reveals. If the earth has an eternal master storyteller of the likes of Scheherezade, it is snow. It is the elemental connection that threads the novel's key moments- Kyungha's arrival in Jeju, Inseon's runaway act to Seoul as a teenager, the first time Inseon recounted her mother's tales to Kyungha- a pivotal moment in their friendship, and Inseon's mother and aunt returning to their village in 1948 to search for the remains of their family members. At one point in the text, referring to the endless circulation of water in the planetary phenomenon of the water cycle, Kyungha seems to have exchanged places with Inseon. She imagines that the snow falling on her face could be the same that covered Inseon as she fell in a construction pit upon her escape to Seoul, or even the same as that which Inseon's aunt and mother dusted off from the corpses' faces to identify their family. It is at this moment that Kyungha's self-identification with the victims, stemming from her deeply empathetic nature, is complete. Anointed by snow, she becomes the conduit, the medium through which traumatic knowledge gushes.

It is in the "heart of the whiteout" (49), the third space that is neither land nor water, that Kyungha must read the inscribed truth of the victims. Kyungha literally steps into Inseon's place as she follows her footprints on the snow to the bank of the stream where Inseon had planned to plant the logs, the exact plot where her father's childhood home had stood before being burned. It is here that she reveals how Kyungha's project had led her to an investigation of her own family history, supplying the gaps of her mother's archive with her own findings (215). As the two friends lay in the snow that seemed to intend to 'seal' them to the ground, only the trees listen on in their silence (219).

Towards Trans-Corporeal Counter-Archives

The inextricably enmeshed networks of the human and the non-human produce different forms of 'kinship' between them. Like all "storied matter," they too exert "undeniable signifying forces" (Iovino, 1-2). Ostups points at the possibility of traumatic representation by means of metonymic transfer (2023) and allegory (2024). In Kang's work, the two are tightly interwoven.

The "black tree trunks" (Kang, 7) of Kyungha's dream resemble crowds of people, both children and adults, huddled together. But as the waves lash up the shore, they turn into hundreds of graves being inundated by the sea of time. They simultaneously represent life and death. In Kyungha's project, they act as the ultimate bridge between the living and the dead, between the past and the present. Despite Kyungha's resolution to drop the project, Inseon carries on, collecting and sawing down logs to shape that are about two metres tall, evidently scaled up from their human-like stature in the dream. This scaling up reveals Inseon's perception of the tall shadows the past casts on the present. They are painted black in what Kyungha had initially thought would resemble a "cloaking in deep slumber" but instead, they look like they are "enduring a nightmare" that goes on for perpetuity (98).

While discussing her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison addresses the skirmish between remembering and forgetting as a narrative device that grants an 'imaginative entrance' into territories riven by historical trauma. "Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past," she enumerates the work of 'doing' history (2019). The logs become the very symbols of re-memory, persisting in their bid to not be buried away and forgotten. When Inseon severs her fingers while working with the logs, in describing the gruesome process of getting them reattached, she

comments that one must “feel the pain.” The ability to bleed and hurt is what prevents the rot, what distinguishes the living from the dead.

Inseon’s two pet budgies, Ami and Ama, reveal at once the fragility and the endurance of humanity. Ami, who could talk in a voice very similar to Inseon’s, had died suddenly, “hid(ing) his illness” (Kang, 132) from Inseon as if she was a predator and not her carer. This perceived suspicion of the bird and the failure of communication, despite understanding each other, is indicative of a breakdown of human logic. When little Ami returns as a huge shadow whose outline Kyungha begins to trace on the wall of Inseon’s living room, the outline seems to overlap with the one of Inseon she had drawn the previous autumn. As the boundaries between the human and the bird blur and intersect, we see how Inseon’s zoomorphisation reveals her vulnerability (Ostups, 79) that she too, like Ami, has hidden behind her cheerful and matter-of-fact demeanour.

The other bird, Ama, in an attempt to save whom Kyungha has flown to Jeju, despite the absurdity of Inseon’s request for this “unreasonable favour” (Kang, 45), becomes her tether amidst the blizzard, urging her to fight her way through the snow and survive. The inexplicable grief that Kyungha feels upon finding her dead becomes a channel through which the grief of a past that is not her comes rushing in. The pulsing in her fingertips- the point of contact with the bird when she had petted her when she last visited Inseon- grows in intensity as Ama too wrestles her way back from death the following morning.

The birds’ two fields of vision point towards the coinciding dream and reality that shapes the latter half of the novel. Like snowflakes, the birds too draw Kyungha’s curiosity about their apparent weightlessness. While both their deaths are treated as non-events, it is from beyond the realm of the living that they exert weight. The sonic affinity between ‘bird’ and ‘word’ materializes in the palpitations Kyungha

feels in her heart and throat, as if the bird is trying to claw its way out of her mouth, exhorting her to speak their grief.

The sea- water in its turbulent, flowing form- represents the relentless onward march of time. In her dream, it is the waves that inundate the graveyard that Kyungha must rescue the remaining graves from. While the snow preserves, the sea washes off the bloody tracks of state-sanctioned atrocities. Where the snow acts as a witness, the sea compels one to forget. In one of the interview transcripts Inseon takes out of a box, a woman confesses of her aversion to sea meat, because the marine life around the area would have fed upon the very bodies of the ones she has lost. What has ordinarily been the lifeline of the island's natives has turned against them, swallowing the victims and concealing the horrors.

Marine metaphors abound the chapters in which Inseon shares the decades of research she and her mother had conducted. The crushing weight of the sea and its dark depths allude to the repressive state government-enforced collective amnesia that is most evident in the gap of thirty-four years of the newspaper records, until a civilian Korean president is elected. Since the mass killings, the force of the ocean water inundating the caves and mines had scattered the remains over the years, hollowed out graves until not a single massacred person's remains could be recovered intact.

Conclusion

It is not only the tree stumps that stand as memorials to the victims but also the very act of writing- for both the narrator and Kang. In uncovering the obliterated and omitted truths of the mass killings and urging the reading public to also bear witness, *We Do Not Part* is a work of memorializing, of performing the necessary labour of remembering and mourning.

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