

Excess of Affect: In Translation

Sneja Gunew

There can be nothing more excessive than affect—sensation before it has been contained by being named as emotion. Affect overwhelms us with sensation so that we corral/articulate it as a specific emotion in panic-stricken response. Along the way we know that emotions are gendered in their performance and performativity. Anger for men has always had different meanings than for women (as the last elections in the United States demonstrated). Underpinning this process is the question of translation—not just from sensation to named emotion but an awareness that we are often doing this within an assumed monolingual (Anglophone?) and shared Eurocentric context. Arising out of a long-term project that looks at the ways in which affect theory is largely dependent on European concepts, my paper examines the recent Man-Booker winner Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* to ask questions concerning the translatability of affect. To what degree, for example, do we need to take into account other taxonomies of affect informed by other languages and cultures as, for example, the Sanskrit aesthetic framework of *rasa/bhava*? Is it useful, for example, to invoke the Korean concept of 'han' as an interpretive lens for considering Kang's text or does this land us inevitably in cultural essentialism? As we open up our concepts to the world, translation will be an unavoidable foundational factor.

We are firmly in the territory of excess. Anger and violence are in the air: whether it be Pankaj Mishra's latest book titled *The Age of Anger* or *Hecate's* 2015 special issue on violence against women (41.1&2). And indeed the connection between the two is worth pondering since both anger and violence are highly gendered and it often seems that when male anger becomes triggered it results in increased violence against women—of many kinds of course since the unrelenting campaign against Hillary Clinton could certainly be perceived as symbolic violence (Solnit). I have to confess that my way of dealing with my own anger after the US elections was to reach for female vengeance texts (films and books), including the excellent Australian collection *Fury* by Samantha Trenoweth. The title of the collection was underpinned by an allusion to the Furies of Greek mythology—those vengeful goddesses that are often linked with a matriarchal Ur-history preceding the reign of the more familiar patriarchal pantheon of gods—including women born of men (was Athena an early example of a trans woman—Zeus's inner goddess?). Both anger and

violence are of course inherently excessive: they are connected with the bursting of boundaries and restraints—and boundaries in turn bring to mind, amongst other things, the kinds of extreme weather conditions we have been increasingly experiencing (Ghosh). We think perhaps in terms of the fury and vengeance of Gaia—the earth finally turning on those who have exploited her. In short, we would probably all agree that anger is a universal emotion but what we might not agree upon is how we diagnose it, what meanings we give it (is it a useful element or always destructive?) and how we typically display it or recognise its manifestation. So let me pause here and parse out the gendered nature of these affective storms (or storms of affect) bearing in mind that, as part of a larger project, I am trying to make a case for resisting the universalisation of affect in terms of the European psy disciplines (Gunew “Subaltern Empathy;” “Editorial”). Amongst these universalising gestures, we need to question why the ultimate praise for a text, particularly if it is perceived as “foreign,” is to describe it as having “universal” appeal. Why that move, what exactly does it mean and what anxiety underpins it? What does this term “universal” camouflage? For example, Han Kang, in the two texts that have been translated into English, writes about anger in ways that render it strange to an Anglophone world. As I was writing this paper a review of Han Kang’s other translated text, *Human Acts*, appeared in the *New York Sunday Times* (Mun). Here, too, the term “universal” was rather nervously invoked at the end of an otherwise detailed and historically informed review revealing that the text deals with a very specific massacre of ordinary Korean citizens including women and children in Gwangju Province in 1980—a Korean precursor perhaps of the Tiananmen massacre, where the state turns on its own young in order to secure its hold on power. *Human Acts* makes for harrowing reading and I will return to it. Think of this as a kind of backdrop to the analysis of Han Kang’s *The Vegetarian*, the recent Man Booker winner translated from the Korean. The central question I will be posing is: what are the specific affective contexts within which we can understand this text? What, in turn, does it teach us about how to make anger legible in a global context?

But before I embark on a reading of this text let me pause to consider the contention I make in the abstract, that “affect” is sensation before it locates itself in emotions or feelings. I first encountered this useful distinction in Teresa Brennan’s work where she states that “I define feelings as sensations that have found the right match in words” (Brennan 5), and later in Rei Terada’s influential introduction to affect theory:

by *emotion* we usually mean a psychological, at least minimally interpretive experience whose physiological aspect

is *affect*. *Feeling* is a capacious term that connotes both physiological sensations (affects) and psychological states (emotions). (Terada 4)

In the (again tentative) work I have done with *rasa/bhava* and Sanskrit taxonomies of affect/emotions (Gunew “Subaltern Empathy;” “Editorial”) it is clear to some degree, as Terada argues, that affect and emotions are subjectless (do not require a subject) but equally we could argue they are useful tools for embodiment—requiring embodiment and hence a kind of personalisation—not simply personification, which remains somewhat abstract. This distinction between affect and emotions/feelings is also maintained in Sianne Ngai’s influential exploration of her study titled *Ugly Feelings*. Her introduction examines the history of theoretical differences between feeling, or emotion, and affect and to some degree depicts them as lying on a continuum:

At the end of the day, the difference between emotion and affect is still intended to solve the same basic and fundamentally descriptive problem it was coined in psychoanalytic practice to solve: that of distinguishing first-person from third-person feeling, and, by extension, feeling that is contained by identity from feeling that is not. (Ngai 27)

The later discussion of Korean *han* throws further light on this distinction.

What follows is one reading of *The Vegetarian* using familiar Western concepts. In an interview (K. Lee) Han Kang clarified that *The Vegetarian* began in a short story published in *Granta* in 2000. The story was titled “The Fruit of My Woman” and depicts a scenario in which a woman turns into a plant. The story is told from both the point of view of the wife who reveals her growing suffocation within an urban environment in a letter to her mother, and of the husband who, though increasingly bewildered, attempts to be supportive of his wife by planting her in a pot on their balcony:

Now her form retains barely a trace of the biped she once was. Her pupils, which seemed to have metamorphosed into shining round grapes, are gradually being buried in brown stems. My wife cannot see anymore. She can’t even flex the ends of the stems. But when I go out onto the balcony I feel a hazy sensation that defeats all language, like a minute electric current pulsing out from her body and into mine. When the leaves which were once my wife’s hands and hair all fell out, and the place where her lips had meshed together split open, releasing a handful of fruit, that sensation ended like a thin thread snapping. (Han 21–22)

Originally published as three separate novellas, *The Vegetarian* retains the three sections that essentially juxtapose the points of view of three characters. The protagonist, Yeong-hye, does not get a separate section, and her point of view appears in italics throughout, as well as through direct speech. The text turns upon self-annihilation—I am not using the term suicide because the text makes clear that various acts of violence upon the protagonist Yeong-hye contribute to her desire to die, or to stop a certain form of life, a certain form of endurance. The first section, titled “The Vegetarian,” is narrated by Yeong-hye’s husband, Mr. Cheong, whose first sentence is “Before my wife turned vegetarian, I’d always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way.” He goes on to explain “there was no reason for us not to get married.” For members of this audience, hearing these words may well set up a slow burn of outrage. The narrative continues to describe the “inexplicable” change in this ordinary woman when she suddenly throws out all the expensive meat in their fridge and becomes a vegetarian (actually, a vegan). Her explanation is that she had a dream. The husband is outraged and recruits her family to overturn this conversion. The result is a family dinner where the father violently forces meat into his daughter’s mouth only to have her retaliate furiously by slitting her own wrist so that she has to be rushed to hospital. Subsequent to these events, the husband divorces her and she recuperates at her sister’s house. Her brother-in-law, a video artist, never named in the text, develops an obsession for her that leads eventually to a complete breakdown for both of them.

The second section, “Mongolian Mark,” is told from the perspective of the un-named brother-in-law who becomes fascinated when he hears his wife In-hye mention a birthmark, known as a Mongolian mark, that her sister still bears, rather than having it typically disappear after childhood. More of this later. The artist begins to fantasise a video in which he films the process of painting flowers over Yeong-hye’s body which extends to filming a man, also painted with flowers, having intercourse with her. He recruits a colleague for this role after persuading Yeong-hye to accede to this project. Overcome by a squeamish resistance, the colleague stops short of the requested intercourse. Meanwhile, it is clear that this proxy projection of lust is actually a materialisation of the artist’s own uncontrollable lust for Yeong-hye and eventually he does have intercourse with her, after getting his own body painted with flowers by a willing female colleague. His wife In-hye discovers the video and calls the authorities—outraged that he had taken advantage of her sister’s mental fragility. Their marriage ends and In-hye is left to care both for her young son and her rapidly disintegrating sister. Interestingly, blurbs on the cover and reviews of the book refer to the eroticism of

the text, and the film made shortly after the book appeared plays on this as well (Lim Woo-Seong). Yeong-hye's own complicity in her sexualisation remains ambiguous: was she exploited while in a mentally disabled state or was she using sexual intercourse as a way to reach another form of life? There is a telling moment in the second section when the brother-in-law narrator states:

Only then did he realize what it was that had shocked him when he'd first seen her lying prone on the sheet. This was the body of a beautiful young woman, conventionally an object of desire, and yet it was a body from which all desire had been eliminated. But this was nothing so crass as carnal desire, not for her—rather, or so it seemed, what she had renounced was the very life her body represented. (Han 85)

The third section is narrated from the point of view of In-hye, the elder sister.¹ It reveals a legacy of domestic abuse by their father, vented particularly on Yeong-hye, the younger and more vulnerable child (Han 157). In-hye describes the increasing sympathy she has for her sister although Yeong-hye's body functions throughout as an enigma—the motives for her actions remain opaque, mysterious. But In-hye, driven by a desperate need to understand, unspools the motivations revealing a kind of fungibility of the characters: they stand in for each other—Mr. Cheong is a mirror of the father; In-hye increasingly transforms into Yeong-hye although at the beginning the contrast between the sisters is accentuated. Unlike her sister, In-hye is an extrovert and a successful business-woman as well as a mother—she copes or endures, no matter what is thrust at her. Her breaking point is when she is forced to watch her sister being intravenously fed after she had stopped eating entirely. The explanation is that Yeong-hye feels herself turning into a tree and indeed her mental fragility is illustrated by both her desire to be naked and her need to stand on her head so that she resembles a tree. Sun and water are all she requires. By the end of the text In-hye too feels drawn to this other form of life (Han 169).

So what is the nature of the enigma? In the first instance it is difficult to fully grasp the dimensions of the public shaming Mr. Cheong feels in relation to his corporate life (because his wife's nipples are discernible at a corporate banquet, as well as her "bad manners" in refusing elaborate dishes since they contain meat). As well, the degree of the family's anger at Yeong-hye's vegetarianism is also noteworthy. Again, a kind of public shaming is indicated. In relation to the details of Yeong-hye's quest, what motivates this process of "becoming" vegetarian, or vegetable, or tree? One way is to

¹ There is also a brother but he does not play much of a role in the plot.

say that the desire to leave the human (deterritorialise it in Deleuzian terms) is due to the ways in which the human is depicted as being fundamentally founded upon and animated by, as well as entitled to, violence against other life-forms. Yeong-hye dreams of a voracious face but hints that this monstrous and predatory being is a projection of what is located inside her—“The face is inside my stomach. It rose up from inside my stomach” (Han 115). There are moments for example (in classic horror terms) where she sits semi-naked in public, grasping a partially eaten bird in her fist (Han 52). Her motivation is a question in everyone’s mind—this is where affect comes in—Yeong-hye depicts a storm of raw sensations before we know what to call them. So here one might locate a resistance to universalisation. How does one translate these sensations into definitive feelings or emotions?

If we stay with one of those extreme examples of universalisation—the categories of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM), then Yeong-hye’s symptoms could be seen as dominated by anorexia and schizophrenia, as her doctor helpfully suggests (Han 140). Feminist readers have long noted that anorexia is still mostly linked with women and that the control and punishment it typically involves are self-directed and often appear driven largely by self-disgust. What crime has Yeong-hye committed that leads her to want to punish herself? Meat eating is one and is generally accepted as involving the abuse of other life forms, increased in magnitude with the industrialisation of meat harvesting (Ruth Ozeki’s *My Year of Meat* comes to mind). But this does not explain her outward serenity at the same time that we become conscious of a roiling anger that is kept in check by Yeong-hye (Han 86), nor the brief eruption of her sexual desire when confronted with the flowers painted on her own and another’s body. Nor does it explain her desire to metamorphose into a tree, a process that has a familiar genealogy in Western mythology (one thinks of Daphne fleeing her rapist by becoming a tree), but may mean something quite different in other cultural contexts. In the course of the text, both the sisters are, indeed, raped by their partners. In addition, the father’s forcing meat onto Yeong-hye could also be seen as constituting a form of rape—certainly as an assault that breaches her bodily integrity. Classically, she feels alienated from her body (for example, she feels a lump in her breast from all the meat she has eaten, Han 49). The scenario of the Freudian uncanny is also present—the metamorphosis of what was known, comforting, and familiar into something monstrous, for example, the affective context produced by marital rape (In-hye after rape, Han 81). Another example of the uncanny is the memory of the family dog that is tortured to death by the father as punishment for

biting and is subsequently eaten by the family (Han 41). There is also the curious figuration of the Mongolian mark, the second novella (independently winning a Korean literary prize) that is the obsession of the never-named artist brother-in-law. Here is a telling moment:

It called to mind something ancient, something pre-evolutionary, or else perhaps a mark of photosynthesis, and he realized to his surprise that there was nothing sexual about it; it was more vegetal than sexual. (Han 83)

In the world of the DSM or of comparative psy disciplines, or cultural anthropology, there have been numerous studies that examine the cultural contexts of diseases including what are called “culture bound syndromes.” Wikipedia is a start but, as always, needs to be treated with care and independently verified. So the following is treading on eggshells but at the same time trying to suggest that these other factors might yield unexpected illuminations. In a review of Han Kang’s second novel to be translated into English, *Human Acts*, Pasha Malla (a Canadian poet and critic) draws attention to the Korean legacies of “hwa-byung” (anger disease) and “han” (thwarted desire). Both have been linked in generative ways not just with the individualism the psy disciplines inevitably suggest but as well with a kind of “social suffering,” eloquently addressed by sociologists including Veena Das. The introduction to the collection bearing that title mentions that “the trauma, pain, and disorders to which atrocity gives rise are health conditions; yet they are also political and cultural matters” (Kleinman, Das and Locke ix). And it is this transition from the personal to the collective that is of interest here. The psy disciplines have traditionally focused on the individual rather than the group. Concepts from other cultures don’t necessarily maintain such a distinction and the Korean concept of han offers one such example. So let us attempt to unpack the meaning of “han” and see what it offers.

Introducing *han*

In a talk delivered in 2000, the well-known novelist Pak Kyong-ni referred to han as comprising the contradictions of sadness and hope that define life, and she argued that it is, moreover, the essence of what generates literature. She also distinguishes in that same talk between Korean “han” and Japanese “ourami” (or “urami”)—and indeed this is how I first encountered the concept of “han” in a UBC doctoral thesis by Miseli Jeon who looked at the distinctions between the two terms in women’s writing and argued that while “urami” seeks vengeance “han,” at least in women’s writing, does not. This is also what Pak suggests:

The Japanese word *ourami* evokes images of the sword and the seeds of militarism, and is a characteristic feeling of the Japanese, for whom vengeance is a virtue. Therefore the Japanese word *ourami* is completely different from the Korean word *Han*. As I have already said, *Han* is an expression of the complex feeling which embraces both sadness and hope. The sadness stems from the effort by which we accept the original contradiction facing all living things, and hope comes from the will to overcome the contradiction. In the present, we accept it; in the future, we will overcome it. (Pak Kyong-ni, "The Feelings and the Thoughts of Korean People in Literature")

Pak also links *han* to shamanism and I will return to this. One of the references cited in the Wikipedia article on "han" is the pioneering critic on Asian American literature Elaine Kim who describes *han* as "the sorrow and anger that grow from the accumulated experiences of oppression. . . . When people die of *han*, it is called dying of *hwabyong*, a disease of frustration and rage following misfortune" (215).² Kim talks about *han* in relation to the occluded history of Korean Americans in the wake of the Rodney King beatings. Tellingly, her essay is titled "Home is where the *han* is" and catalogues somewhat bitterly the ways in which Korean Americans were and are reminded that they are not authentic Americans and that they will always be part of the nation on sufferance. So here in essence is an important element of *han*: that it personalises a history of political and colonial oppression. This personally felt political awareness (both singular and plural) is what makes *han* distinctive, something also referred to by Pak in relation to the Japanese colonisation of Korea and explored by Han Kang in her second novel *Human Acts*, dealing with the legacy of such political oppression via the series of authoritarian dictators that have ruled Korea in contemporary times.

Another element in Korean *han* is to consider the ways in which *han* is acquired generationally. In an important essay on the workings of postmemory, Seo-Young Chu argues that for the generations who have not experienced historical trauma, the imagination allows them to enter it, in her argument, through the genre of science fiction. She describes the dynamic via the concepts of metonymy (contiguity) and apostrophe (direct address to an absent figure).

Metonymy is literalised as the genetic transference of *han*-filled memories from a Korean mother to her unborn Korean American child (to whom she is literally contiguous and

² My thanks to Christine Kim for alerting me to the full citation and sharing with me the chapter in her recent book that uses the concept of *han*.

closely related by blood). Apostrophe is literalised as extrasensory mind-to-mind communication between two people separated by temporal, generational, and geographical distance. Lyric time is literalised as the simultaneity of past and present within the Korean American psyche. The invocation to the muse is literalised each time the ghost of a Korean ancestor uses a descendant's organs of speech to vocalise experiences that happened before the descendant was born. What unifies these literalised tropes, incorporating them into a coherent science fiction narrative, is the Korean American telepath. (Chu 100)

Chu also links her analysis to one of the most famous Korean American artists Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's text *Dictée*. Cha was tragically murdered at the age of 31 when her work was gaining recognition and she remains an important precursor for Korean American writers amongst others. Here Chu singles out the ways in which "apostrophe" or direct address is linked to a kind of literary possession by the muse (Chu 111), one that I will tentatively connect to shamanism.

In her recent book the Canadian feminist critic Christine Kim explores postmemory in relation to the hiatus in affect involved in intergenerational transmission of emotions, particularly in the context of diaspora. Using her own history, Kim analyses the work of Canadian artist David Khang and states,

I am, in fact, profoundly disturbed to realise that while the images from *Wrong Places* push me in all kinds of intellectual directions, they do not provoke any visceral reactions even though they raise pressing issues of social justice, political representation, and ideological violence. (C. Kim 98)

Later in her study she suggests that "perhaps the absence of palpable emotions is precisely how these disruptions are felt given that diaspora involves dispersal not only in terms of geography and generation, but also the translation of affect and emotion" (C. Kim 106). For Kim, like Chu, the gap between the direct experience of han and its collective aspect turns it into a useful form for thinking—something that theorists of affect have long argued (Thrift).

In another early and influential essay, "Discourse on Han in Postcolonial Korea: Absent Suffering and Industrialist dreams," James Freda (1999) links han to the Korean liberation theologies of the 1970s arguing that this "existential field of immiseration" provides a way for the masses to work towards utopian revolution (Freda #8), and suggests that the rise of han constituted a politicising factor—politics viscerally experienced and being articulated in terms of invoking the concept of han as quintessentially a defining national characteristic.

He also, interestingly, sees the roots of han in Shamanism as a folk culture (Freda #31). Jae Hoon Lee, a scholar of comparative religions, also explores han in relation to minyung liberation theology and states that “Korean Shamanism, the indigenous religion that has served as the matrix of Korean culture throughout its history, has been developed around the reality of *han*. The shamans, the living symbol of *han* in Korea, become themselves through the experience of han, while the main pursuit of their rituals is to resolve the han of the people” (Lee 2). Lee argues further that, “The discrimination against females in that society [the Yi dynasty] was so extreme that the existence of femininity is often directly identified with *han*” (Lee 103) and “The *han* of the shaman represents the *han* of Korean women” (Lee 104). More recent studies from cultural anthropology have indeed explored the preponderance of female shamans and their female clients in Korean culture, particularly the work of cultural anthropologist Laurel Kendall.³

To summarise: han suggests a link between the singular and the plural—historical and social suffering intertwined with individual experience. It also suggests that the social is modified by how individuals actually deal with han. This is something that Han Kang explores in this text as well as in her novel *Human Acts*—the ways in which the Gwangju massacre is experienced via a group of individuals who are both individuals with unique experiences as well as being part of a group. As one character states: “The force of my suffering surges through me in a fury that seemed it would burst my heart” (*Human Acts* 180). It is one of the biggest ethical challenges facing us now and always—that of seeing victims as individuals in the face of staggering statistics (for example, a toddler who was part of a family who delighted in his idiosyncrasies washed up on a beach). So, informed with han as a newly translated “structure of feeling” (Raymond Williams’s neutral designation), let us go back to an interpretation of *The Vegetarian* this time infused by considerations of han. What if we were to see the whole text as a sustained allegory of female han—a suffering that is composed not only of individual elements but involving as well the collective suffering experienced by women under patriarchy (Solnit)?

In the first section we move between the husband, Mr. Cheong’s outrage at his hitherto ordinary wife’s growing rebelliousness figured by the fact that she not only refuses to eat meat at important business banquets but also refuses to be constricted by wearing a bra. In other

³ See also Merose Hwang who examines the disciplining of the “mudang” or female shaman in contemporary Korean politics.

words, she appears to deliberately shame him in public. Meanwhile Yeong-hye

Dreams of my hands around someone's throat, throttling them, grabbing the swinging ends of their long hair and hacking it all off, sticking my finger into their slippery eyeball. . . I become a different person, a different person rises up inside me, devours me. . . Can only trust my breasts now. I like my breasts, nothing can be killed by them. (Han 32)

However, as her anorexia advances, these markers of her gender (and her humanity in general) wither away. What grows is her awareness of being haunted by the suffering of the lives she has absorbed:

Yells and howls, threaded together layer upon layer, are enmeshed to form that lump. Because of meat. I ate too much meat. The lives of the animals I ate have all lodged there. Blood and flesh, all those butchered bodies are scattered in every nook and cranny. . . their lives still stick stubbornly to my insides. (Han 49)

In the second section, "Mongolian Mark," the brother-in-law describes Yeong-hye's slitting of her wrist as her trying "to hack at it like it was a piece of meat" (Han 66). So in a sense she is rejecting her own body because it too is meat. After he covers her body in flowers it is as though she had been given another carapace or model of being; she becomes more serene and less dominated by her dream. In ways that recall the short story, the brother-in-law dreams of her body as green and exuding sap (Han 96). The Mongolian mark is described in Korean folklore as a shamanic mark associated with birth. So there may be a suggestion that Yeong-hye is undergoing a Shamanistic initiation or transformation. In the third section Yeong-hye arguably functions as a guide to another state of being for her sister In-hye. While initially she is a figure of abjection, increasingly her behavior raises questions concerning certain normative modes of existence.

She was no longer able to cope with all that her sister reminded her of. She'd been unable to forgive her for soaring alone over a boundary she herself could never bring herself to cross, unable to forgive that magnificent irresponsibility that had enabled Yeong-hye to shuck off social constraints and leave her behind, still a prisoner. And before Yeong-hye had broken those bars, she'd never even known they were there. (Han 142–43)

In-hye also recognises that Yeong-hye had absorbed their father's violence "deep into the marrow of her bones," thereby absolving her from having to deal with it. Eventually she realises that "She had never lived ... she had done nothing but endure. . . she was nothing but a child who had never lived" (Han 162). Mysteriously she begins

to haemorrhage even after the ostensible reason (a uterine polyp) has been cut away. She too now perceives her body as an open wound. Meditating on her sister's state In-hye wonders

What other dimension might Yeong-he's soul have passed into, having shrugged off flesh like a snake shedding its skin. . . Had her body metamorphosed into a sturdy trunk, with white roots sprouting from her hands and clutching the black soil?... When Yeong-hye had balanced upside down and stretched out every fibre in her body, had these things been awakened in her soul? (Han 170)

A little earlier she had been struck by the existence of trees as green flames but had found their presence, "Merciless. . . and a frighteningly chill form of life" (Han 169). As her dying sister speeds away in an ambulance, In-hye scrutinises the flaming green trees again, "As if waiting for an answer. As if protesting against something. The look in her eyes is dark and insistent" (Han 183).

Reading this text within the context of debates about the post-human raises questions concerning affect as a modality of translation. The European psy disciplines have traditionally reinforced the boundaries of a self-contained subjectivity—the manifestation and shoring up of the sovereign self. Exploring affective concepts outside that tradition may enable us to imagine a new materialism, a new corporeality urgently required to deal with the global transformations we face. In a recent collection on the new materialism, the political theorist William Connolly considers the "role *affect* plays in perception as they jolt the tacit feeling of belonging to the world. . . transfigured into a feeling of vertigo" (Connolly 192). That vertigo is what I mean by the idea of affect as a modality of translation that does not foreclose too quickly on the reassurance of familiar taxonomies of emotions. A concept such as han provides the unfamiliar singularity of an intensity of suffering and frustration yoked to plural as well as specific histories of political oppression and inequity currently but not inevitably linked to dense substrata of national groups enduring colonialism and other forms of oppression. If it is thoroughly gendered in this text that is not surprising given the profound misogyny always bubbling beneath the surface of our existence with volcanic ferocity (Solnit). *The Vegetarian* might be seen as the story of a conversion where one sister guides the other to a more planetary model of existence. Why planetary? I am using it in the sense that Gayatri Spivak has suggested the human as being a planetary accident rather than the measure of things; "planetary" speaks of "an imperative to re-imagine the subject as planetary accident . . . rather than global agents" (Spivak 339). It also brings to mind Amitav Ghosh's recently published *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and*

the Unthinkable, where he analyses “the uncanny intimacy of our relationship with the nonhuman” (Ghosh 33). Dwelling on the notion of the uncanny Ghosh argues:

No other word comes close to expressing the strangeness of what is unfolding around us. For these changes are not merely strange in the sense of being unknown or alien; their uncanniness lies precisely in the fact that in these encounters we recognise something we had turned away from . . . the presence and proximity of nonhuman interlocutors. (Ghosh 30)

Yeong-hye and In-hye represent the possibilities of post-human subjectivity in which there is an abdication from or relinquishment of the Anthropocene. Becoming tree represents an inversion, a perceptual vertigo, in many ways. Trees are the conduits between earth and air. They also represent a new version of the “mouthwork” I have explored elsewhere—the mouth that eats and speaks is linked in women to the mouth that gives birth (Gunew 2007). Traditionally the birth mouth has been used to silence the other mouth. In the call for papers for this conference, Carole Ferrier mentioned the work of Teresa de Lauretis who writes eloquently about the implications of the silence of women “the theoretical silence of ‘woman,’ the negation of women as the subjects of discourse” (Lauretis 243). Using Woolf as her example she goes on to say,

women’s writing . . . can be approached only circuitously . . . not referentially but figurally, by means of images, metaphors, metonymies—figures of speech . . . the very condition of speaking as a women depends on the recognition of the contradiction that her speech must represent. (Lauretis 247)

My argument has been that *The Vegetarian* constitutes such a contradictory text. In this allegorical text the inversion where the birth mouth sprouts flowers indicates other possible forms of life and modes of articulation. When Yeong-hye stops speaking, her sister takes over and the trees themselves beckon in post-human solidarity. There are many other examples of trees to consider in literature. We have been reminded of Alexis Wright’s Oblivia who took refuge in the hollow tree. Unlike Daphne, she did not quite metamorphose into a tree to escape her rapists. Let me also draw your attention to Aboriginal elder Bill Neidjie’s text *Story about Feeling* where there is a whole section titled “Tree.”

What for they cutting it land?
Because tree going down and that road e go.
Soon as bitumen there e don’t grow any grass there.
That road e stay. . . no grass.

Side e's right but middle of it nothing.
You drive, you look lumber-stick there, big log there,
Big 'dozer pull it out. . .
Well your body you feel. You say. . .
 "Oh. . .that tree same as me!"
I look tree but I say. . .
 "Just like mother, father or brother,
 grandma."
'Course your granny, your mother, your brother
because this earth, this ground,
this piece of ground e grow you. (30)

Here too, as with han, the affect generated is plural rather than individual and requires translation. The familiar distinction between the individual and their contextual relations is profoundly interrogated. At the end of her book, Lauretis suggests that another way forward for feminist theory might be to be "revitalised by the process of reading intended as a practice of language, something like translation, a learning to confront the otherness of language . . . in a text, and thus also confront otherness or alterity in oneself, and otherness or heterogeneity in the world" (Lauretis 256). Such understanding is facilitated by moving outside a monolingual sphere to the multilingual—in this case the parallel taxonomies of affect and emotion that exist in many cultures and languages—overlapping but not identical. These concepts can be translated to some degree but always suggest an excess that eludes translation and it is this excess that is vital for understanding those affective sensations that always resist full translation into taxonomies of feeling.

Acknowledgments: My thanks to Margery Fee, Bronwen Levy and Kathy Mezei for invaluable feedback on earlier versions of this paper.

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