

City University of New York (CUNY)

CUNY Academic Works

Publications and Research

Queens College

2018

The DMZ Responds

Seo-Young J. Chu
CUNY Queens College

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: https://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/546

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).
Contact: AcademicWorks@cuny.edu

The DMZ Responds

Seo-Young Chu

I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

—Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”¹

The part of me that contemplates the human rights of North Korean people is the same part of me that contemplates the human rights of the Korean DMZ: the whole of me, and more.

—Anonymous

Prologue: Tragic Illogic

Over the years the two Koreas have been repeatedly personified and anthropomorphized (in movies, journalism, and even nonfiction books) but never in a consistent manner. Are South Korea and North Korea twin siblings separated at birth? Are they fellow patients in a psychiatric ward? Are they doomed heterosexual lovers, each unaware that the other is a spy? Are they clones? Are they organ donor (South) and recipient (North)? If not separate human beings, then are the Koreas parts of what used to be a single body that was severed? Are they *nation* (limb) and *phantomnation* (phantom limb, as experienced by an amputee), as Theresa Hak Kyung Cha suggests in her 1982 work *Dictee*? The inconsistency of these and other characterizations ends up revealing the tragically illogical nature of the division that made such characterizations possible in the first place.

* I wish to thank two anonymous referees and Helen Shin, editor of this special issue of *Telos*, for helpful comments and encouragement. Views and any errors are entirely mine.

1. Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1981), p. 181.

The fact that the personification of the Koreas resists coherent formulation at once reflects and explains the inability of the “two Koreas” to relate to each other in a way that makes sense.

In her essay “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” Donna Haraway argues that the “[c]yborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves.”² Haraway obviously did not have the two Koreas in mind when she wrote her essay, but many of her arguments have come to inform and empower my own perspectives on Korea. In what follows, I hope to demonstrate that cyborg imagery, and science-fictional imagery more generally, can offer a way out of the maze of dualisms in which the situation on the Korean Peninsula has too often been framed.

At the center of my demonstration: a man-made creature, a creature conceived by two inexperienced men in a room inside an executive office building in Washington, DC, on an August night in the midst of the end of World War II. Some seventy years later, half a planet away from its place of conception, the creature in question inhabits roughly 1,000 square kilometers, its serpentine figure four kilometers wide and 248 kilometers long, its curves sprawling obliquely across the middle of the Korean Peninsula. Its numerous artificial tools of visual faculty are necessarily telescopic, enabling sight across distances that are (for now, at least) impossible to cross.

For decades this creature’s body has been kept in a state of constant tension, immobilized by some 1,600,000 active military personnel on both sides of the creature’s length. The soldiers fiercely guard the creature around the clock, every day of the year. Hence the epithet “most heavily fortified border in the world.” Yet the creature’s many different identities have led to other epithets as well, among them: “no-man’s-land,” “tourist attraction,” “Cold War relic.” Most of us, however, know it as the Korean Demilitarized Zone, or the DMZ, which is the name that I will use in the pages that follow.

By the end of this essay, I hope to have shown that the Korean DMZ is a creature whose pluripotent future becomes most promising when construed as that of a cybernetic organism transcending binary oppositions—oppositions between war and peace, life and death, the literal and the figurative, North and South, male and female, above and below.

2. *Ibid.*

Etymologically the noun “zone” comes from the Latin and Greek words for “belt,” and indeed the DMZ resembles a belt cinched around the waist of the Korean Peninsula. But the meanings and uses and connotations of the noun “zone” have multiplied exponentially in recent decades. As Brian McHale argues in *Postmodernist Fiction*, the fictions of authors such as Thomas Pynchon, Angela Carter, and Vladimir Nabokov are inhabited by heterotopian “zones” where “incommensurable spaces are juxtaposed or superimposed”³ and/or where space is “constructed and deconstructed at the same time.” If the future incarnation of the DMZ is that of a cybernetic organism, then this cyborg will feel most at home in the “zone,” and the zone will be both shaped and unshaped by the texts, concepts, and historical events that I explore below.

A Geomantic Injury

Either as a zone or as a personified figure, the DMZ does not come to the minds of many Koreans or Korean Americans without eliciting thoughts of geomancy. Consciously or subconsciously, Koreans have been living with geomancy for so long that it is natural to draw on the geomantic framework to discuss how Koreans have been affected by the DMZ. There is something hyperbolic about the way in which the DMZ appears to implement the precepts of geomancy. By “geomancy” I mean the art of educating knowledge from geographical configurations. The form of geomancy that I have in mind here is a Korean form of geomancy known as *p’ungsu* (풍수), which has evolved in Korea for thousands of years.⁴ Korean geomancy, in the tradition of Chinese philosophical and religious ideas, recognizes the importance of the harmonious balancing of the heavenly *qi* (气) of *yang* and the earthly *qi* of *yin* as governing forces of the universe. *Qi* is vital energy.⁵ For example, Korean geomancy rests on the primacy of the presence of such balancing in characterizing a place as a *myeongdang* (명당)—an auspicious site—for human living or burial. The *yin–yang* principles, which have long been integrated into Confucianism and Taoism, have been widely accepted in China and Korea.

3. Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, Inc., 1987), pp. 163, 45.

4. Hong-Key Yoon, *Culture of Fengshui in Korea: An Exploration of East Asian Geomancy* (New York: Lexington Books, 2008).

5. Koreans pronounce *qi* as *gi* (or *ki*), but Chinese pronounce it as *chi*. *Yin* (negative, dark) is pronounced as *eum* and written as 음 in Korea; *yang* is pronounced as *yang* in both Korea and China but is written as 양 in Korea.

While *p'ungsu* may not be as widespread today as it was in earlier centuries, it still influences the way in which many Koreans (and Korean Americans) practice mindfulness toward the environments that they inhabit. For example, when deciding on what kind of property to buy, modern-day Koreans often turn to geomantic principles for guidance. Like *fengshui* (its Chinese counterpart), *p'ungsu* is a complex art encompassing numerous disciplines: e.g., ecology, landscape architecture, geopolitics, urban planning, and even the medical practice of acupuncture. In fact, *p'ungsu* can be understood as acupuncture applied to the environment. Its adherents regard the land as a living organism through which *qi* circulates just as it circulates through the human body. This energy is said to converge at crucial points of sensitivity distributed throughout the organism. In the human body, these spots are known as *hyeol* (혈) or acupuncture points. In the case of topography, these spots are also called *hyeol*, and a wider area including a *hyeol* spot is known as *myeongdang*. Seoul is frequently cited as an exemplary instance of *myeongdang* due to the expressive syntax of mountains and flowing water—a city facing water with mountains in its background (배산임수)—that characterize the city's geographical location.

At first glance, the DMZ might appear to be a straightforward case of *myeongdang*. For example, the DMZ seemingly begets geopolitical symmetry by bisecting the peninsula and dividing Korea into equal and opposing halves reminiscent of *yin* and *yang*, twin forces integral to *p'ungsu*, promoting harmonious acts of cooperation, coordination, and competition. That the DMZ implements geomantic precepts is particularly apparent if it is viewed as a benign bisector of the Baekdudaegan—the mountain range that forms the spine of the Korean Peninsula, the spine through which, according to *p'ungsu* experts, Korean *qi* originating in Mount Baekdu in North Korea flows and spreads throughout Korea. Like a geomantic diagram, moreover, the DMZ brims with portentous icons and is encrypted with mystifying acronyms and near-synonymies: Military Demarcation Line (MDL), Ceasefire Line, Armistice Line, Bridge of No Return, Freedom Bridge, Joint Security Area (JSA), P'anmunjeom (판문점), Truce Village, “Most Heavily Armed Border in the World.”

Yet closer inspection reveals the DMZ to be a geomantic phenomenon that defies easy analysis. Charged with symbolic tension, the DMZ is also charged less symbolically with land mines and with kinesthetic tension in the bodies of soldiers from both sides. Indeed, the figurative and literal dimensions of the DMZ are hard to tell apart. The DMZ is a place where

dualities such as militarized and demilitarized assert themselves aggressively yet ring hollow—where supposed oppositions such as Korean *self* and Korean *other* exist in the most twisted state possible.

For so long since the establishment of the DMZ, typical pictures of the Military Demarcation Line inside the DMZ have been those in which several South Korean and North Korean soldiers stand guard between blue barracks. To view any of the images is to feel not geomantic balance but geomantic sickness. What do I mean by geomantic sickness? The uneasiness and disharmony of their postures reflect the wrongness of the way *qi* inhabits the soldiers and their environment. According to practitioners of *p'ungsu*, the vitality of a land depends upon the health of its *myeongdang*. If a site of *myeongdang* is disturbed, the consequent disruption to the flow of *qi* may render the country vulnerable to catastrophes that can range from chaotic weather to collective emotional hardship. In his essay “Gyeongbok Palace: History, Controversy, Geomancy,” the Korean American historian Minsoo Kang addresses some of the violations of *myeongdang* that took place during Korea’s colonial period (1910–1945). There are a number of well-known methods that Imperial Japan employed to disempower its subjects, among them forced name changes, sexual slavery, and medical experimentation. But what is not as well known, according to Kang, is the geomantic injury that Japanese authorities inflicted on Korea through the demolition of key buildings, the defacement and dislocation of monuments, and—eeriest of all—enormous metal spikes drilled into the Korean land in places where colonial authorities had located vital sensory spots or points of *myeongdang*. Such spikes were placed strategically throughout Seoul to misdirect the flow of *qi* into error and disarray. To adherents of *p'ungsu*, these spikes, which were discovered and unearthed in the 1990s, constituted acts of geomantic mutilation calculated to weaken the *qi* of the Korean land and people. As Kang puts it, the geomantic assault on Korea was “like deliberately putting acupuncture needles in the wrong points of a body to harm it.”⁶

Paralyzed

As the metal spikes imply, *myeongdang* has a negative counterpart. The Korean term for this negative counterpart is *hyoongdang* (흉당). What would be a textbook case of *hyoongdang*? The sites with metal spikes

6. Minsoo Kang. “Gyeongbok Palace: History, Controversy, Geomancy,” in *Of Tales and Enigmas* (n.p.: Prime Books, 2006). p. 209.

inserted obviously suggest themselves as a possible answer. However, there exists a much more obvious answer—the Korean Demilitarized Zone—one that to my knowledge is rarely (if at all) mentioned in connection to *p'ungsu*. If the metal spikes that Kang discusses in his essay are acupuncture needles deliberately inserted in places to misdirect *qi*, then the DMZ, which cuts Korea's mountainous spine into two halves, is a stab to the solar plexus, a vivisection made with no regard to the subject's welfare, an incision that remains raw and unhealed for well over half a century. The foreign objects embedded in the DMZ—the land mines, the Bridge of No Return, etc.—are surgical instruments left thoughtlessly inside the sliced-open midsection of the land. No other site of *hyoongdang* has done so much to weaken the flow of *qi* in Korea. No other *hyoongdang* has done so much to destabilize Korea's vitality and health.

Given the overt “symmetry” of the DMZ, one might suspect that the creation of the DMZ was carefully planned. In fact, very little planning went into its creation—a process characterized through and through by patriarchy. Male faces, male voices, and male decision-makers have occupied the literal space-time of the Korean DMZ since its inception in the form of its predecessor, the 38th parallel, in 1945, when Korea was carved into a Soviet fragment and a U.S. fragment. The decision to split Korea along the 38th parallel was made in a matter of hours in Washington, DC, by two inexperienced members of the State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee. With little time to complete their task, and little knowledge of the soon-to-be-severed land, Lieutenant Colonels Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel selected an intangible line as a boundary that might satisfy equally the United States and the Soviet Union, both of which recognized the geopolitically strategic location of the Korean Peninsula. According to the journalist Don Oberdorfer:

[The] two young officers . . . had little preparation for the task. Working in haste and under great pressure, and using a *National Geographic* map for reference, they proposed that U.S. troops occupy the area south of the thirty-eighth parallel, which was approximately halfway up the peninsula and north of the capital city of Seoul, and that Soviet troops occupy the area north of the parallel. . . . No Korea experts were involved in the decision.⁷

7. Don Oberdorfer and Robert Carlin, rev. 3rd ed., *The Two Koreas: A Contemporary History* (New York: Basic Books, 2014), p. 5.

Aside from the fact that it splits the peninsula roughly in half, there is nothing about the 38th parallel that makes sense as a geopolitical boundary. As the geographer Shannon McCune wrote in 1949: “Korea, a long-unified nation, has, on its liberation from Japan, been split by a purely geodetic line. This line is found on maps but is not evident in the geographic landscape.” Moreover, the “line itself marks no specific natural or cultural barrier in Korean geography,” and it “goes against the grain of the land forms.” A “line with such an origin and of such character,” McCune warned, “will not be an aid to peace and security.”⁸ (Note: it was around but not strictly along the 38th parallel that the Korean War came to a stalemate and the Military Demarcation Line (MDL) was drawn in 1953.)⁹ The most heavily armed border in the world originated out of a hurried and poorly informed judgment by two inexperienced officers of the U.S. State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee unfamiliar with the land.

I have often read accounts that Rusk and Bonesteel made their decision in a matter of hours (or even minutes) around midnight between August 10 and August 11, 1945. Whenever I read such accounts, I cannot

8. Shannon McCune, “The Thirty-Eighth Parallel in Korea,” *World Politics* 1, no. 2 (1949): 223, 227, 226, 228.

9. I am indebted to a referee not only for suggesting that I provide some more details on the establishment of the DMZ, but also for providing me with a detailed account of the various DMZ proposals through the course of the war. The agreement on the truce and the DMZ followed years of fight and a variety of proposals. The fighting went through violent ups and downs. The North Korean army initially succeeded in overpowering the South Korean army and advanced deeply into South Korea during the first few months of the war, but the joint United Nations-South Korean forces succeeded in repelling the North Korean forces, soon captured Pyongyang, the North Korean capital, and advanced even further to near the China-North Korea border in a few months. The entry of the Chinese army into the war, however, forced the UN-South Korean forces to retreat. Even as early as July 1950, a month after the outbreak of the war, the U.S. Department of Defense considered a DMZ across the neck of the peninsula between the 39th and 40th parallels, along the Chinese and Soviet frontiers. In June 1951, a year after the outbreak of the war, the Soviet Union’s ambassador to the United Nations called for a ceasefire and the mutual withdrawal of the forces from the 38th parallel. In November 1951, the U.S. Secretary of State proposed a buffer zone ten miles on each side of the Yalu River. Having agreed on a cease-fire in July 1953, however, the two sides reached an agreement on a DMZ in November 1953 on the basis of the battle line at the time of the armistice. See Oberdorfer and Carlin, *The Two Koreas*; Bruce Cumings, *Korea’s Place in the Sun* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2005); and Peter Farrar, “Britain’s Proposal for a Buffer Zone South of the Yalu in November 1950: Was It a Neglected Opportunity to End the Fighting in Korea?,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 2 (1981): 328–29.

help but view the situation as though from outer space. The decision to divide Korea along the 38th parallel occurred half a planet away from Korea itself and half a day into Korea's past. As this fateful line was being drawn at around midnight EST between August 10 and 11, it was around noon-time on August 11 on the other side of the globe in what was then still Korea—not North Korea, not South Korea, but Korea. Not yet had the Republic of Korea (ROK) formally come into existence. Not yet had the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) formally come into existence. Not yet had the riddle of Korea emerged: was an ancient nation about to be amputated, or were two new nations—"twin siblings"—about to be born?

Over the decades following the split, male decision-makers have continued to control the DMZ. The public space of the DMZ has continued to be pervaded by spectacles of brotherhood and male bodies often hyper-masculinized by design. Soldiers at JSA/P'anmunjeom are chosen for their intimidating appearance. A black belt in martial arts is required. U.S. soldiers assigned to P'anmunjeom are selected for height and physical bearing. The North Korean sentinels are among the best-fed people in their country, a country devastated by famine.

The Korean DMZ is characterized not only by a heavily gendered presence but also by a heavily gendered absence. The history of the DMZ is virtually bereft of women. There has been a striking dearth of female voices, female faces, and female bodies in the records, documents, and promotional brochures that constitute the "official" story of the Korean Demilitarized Zone.¹⁰ Despite—or maybe because of—the absence of female bodies and female voices in the *literal* space-time of the DMZ, the DMZ's *figurative* space-time has been marked by a noticeably female presence. More specifically, the DMZ tends to assume conspicuously fem-

10. On May 24, 2015, U.S. activist Gloria Steinem and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Leymah Ghowee of Liberia, with other women activists, crossed the heavily fortified DMZ on a trip publicized as a march for peace, reconciliation, and human rights (Daniel Costa-Roberts, "Gloria Steinem, Peace Activists Cross Demilitarized Zone Separating Koreas," PBS, May 24, 2015). Much earlier, in 1989, a female South Korean college student, without South Korean government authorization, visited Pyongyang to participate in an international youth conference. She was arrested and jailed upon return for violating a South Korean national security law. See Suk-Young Kim, *DMZ Crossing: Performing Emotional Citizenship Along the Korean Border* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2014); Andrei Lankov, "Im Su-kyung—Then and Now," *Korea Times*, March 1, 2017. Women's presence in the DMZ, however, is still more exceptional than normal.

inine attributes whenever it is *figuratively* characterized in literature and the arts.

The following personal anecdote illustrates the ways in which feminized aspects of the DMZ appear both literally imperceptible and figuratively fraught. During a 2011 visit to Korea, I noticed a pair of figurines—one male, one female—greeting visitors near entryways to buildings and bridges in DMZ tourist destinations such as Imjingak and Odusan. The male figure was clearly a South Korean MP. The female figure proved more difficult to identify. Even South Korean officials were unable to give a coherent answer regarding the “identity” of the female statue. One authority suggested that the statue might be a representation of a North Korean soldier. Another authority insisted that the woman represented in the statue was definitely South Korean. Eventually I realized that the statue had most likely been modeled after a female character from the 2000 South Korean film *J.S.A.: Joint Security Area*.¹¹ The character, Sophie E. Jean, is from neither North Korea nor South Korea; instead she is from Switzerland. (Her mother is Swiss and her father is Korean.) As a Swiss Army major, she is assigned by the Neutral Nations Supervisory Commission to investigate a mysterious incident that has taken place in the DMZ. In the process of solving the case, Major Jean learns unsettling details about her own identity and origins.

The story told above is part of a larger pattern. Personifications of the DMZ have a remarkable tendency to assume the characteristics of a young woman. This young woman is seemingly Korean but actually of often perplexing nationality and enigmatic origin. She is portrayed as vulnerable, sometimes hauntingly so. And yet she does possess strange agency, as when she challenges us to resist viewing her as an object of mystification, victimization, and/or worshipful desire. Her strange agency, furthermore, is intimately interconnected to geomantic consequences of the DMZ—consequences that reach beyond the borders of the peninsula itself. The DMZ has had a profound geomantic impact on the transnational Korean psyche. For Koreans at home and abroad, the DMZ has been a constant reminder not only of their country’s division, a past war, and a possible future war, but also of the unsettled and unsettling truce, and the absence of durable peace on the peninsula.

11. *JSA: Joint Security Area*, directed by Chan-wook Park, produced by Jae-myeong Shim and Eun Lee, with performances by Yeong-ae Lee and Byung-hun Lee (Seoul: CJ Entertainment, 2000).

Haraway's Vision of a Maze of Dualisms

Before I discuss literary and artistic representations of the DMZ, I wish to offer a brief summary of Haraway's maze of "dualisms."¹² Toward the end of this paper, I will return to offer my thoughts on what Haraway's framework implies for analyzing the problems facing the Korean Peninsula.

Haraway's world is a pre-cybernetic world of "militarism, patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism" characterized by "dualisms." The world is in transition to a cybernetic world. It is a world in which (1) the "Western self" has conflicting relations with the "other" (e.g., women, people of color, workers, nature, and animals), (2) "essentialism" prevails to stress the primacy of "identity" rather than "affinity," but (3) identities are increasingly fractured, and (4) borders are increasingly leaky, for example, between human and animal, between human-animal and machine, and between physical and non-physical.

Haraway aims to build "an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism" for a post-human and post-gender world. She recognizes that the myth she wants to build may be blasphemous, but she hopes that the majority will tolerate and protect her belief. She believes that her myth is full of "contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes," even dialectically. She also recognizes that the society she imagines must confront the "tension of holding incompatible things together." Society will accept this tension insofar as these incompatible things are necessary and true. She further notes that the order in her new society will be based on affinity among and for cyborgs—cyborgs that exist beyond dichotomies such as male/female and human/machine.

Life in Korea: An Injured Land, a Maze of Dualisms

As I explain in the following pages, what has resulted from the impact of the division on the transnational Korean psyche is a geomantic black hole, a geomantic unconscious (so to speak) where questions of Korea's division take on a variety of speculative shapes and guises in the artwork and writings of members of the Korean diaspora. Although they work in different mediums, the artists and writers I will discuss all illustrate the geomantic force of the DMZ as a shape-shifting locus that ironizes spatial dialectics such as center and periphery, near and far, inside and outside, symmetry and asymmetry, home and elsewhere—dualities that complexly intersect with the duality of North and South. In each case, moreover, such

12. Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," pp. 149–58, 167, 177.

ironies hold the figure of the DMZ in a state of inertia, ambiguous futurity, and/or suspended agency. In each of these works, the setting, literally or figuratively, is the DMZ, where violence sometimes afflicts even aggressors. People either are haunted, have to confront political or social turmoil, or suffer from a mysterious disease or a mystifying loss of freedom. All these give rise to a plausible interpretation of the setting as a disoriented and disorienting place—a *hyoongdang*. As already mentioned, the DMZ bisects the Baekdudaegan. The bisection, however, has not been benign. Not only has it blocked the flow of human *qi* between the two Koreas, but it has also deprived Koreans of peace and security. In the literary and artistic works I discuss, a central theme, as in geomancy, is the interaction between land and human beings. The DMZ has inflicted suffering for human inhabitants in it and outside of it. All the works of literature and art I discuss vividly describe the injury and the pain arising from the DMZ. Note, however, that geomancy offers a useful frame to understand the past and the injury to the land and the people, but not necessarily to visualize a future. For the future, we require, in Haraway's words, "regeneration, not rebirth."¹³ And it is cyborgs—as in "MISS DMZ," the final work I discuss—that help us think about a way out of the injury and suffering.

Fearful Asymmetry

Consider the gothic short story "A Fearful Symmetry" by Minsoo Kang, who is not only a historian but also a fiction writer. "A Fearful Symmetry" is set in a recent-day DMZ that is haunted by a ghost. The title vividly evokes not only Blake's poem "The Tyger" ("Tyger Tyger, burning bright, / In the forests of the night; / What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?") but also the geomantic configuration of the DMZ. North-South symmetry around the DMZ has created not an auspicious but a fearful symmetry. Ironically, however, the story is absent of any explicit antagonism between North and South. The ghost, we learn, is a *South* Korean woman who was brutally violated and tortured at a guard post by *South* Korean soldiers. The title of the story refers to the fact that the ghost continues to haunt the DMZ even after the men who beat and raped her have been punished and brought to justice. A haunted place cannot be a *myeongdang*. As the narrator puts it: "The story should have ended there but apparently did not."¹⁴ The ghost's uncanny sobbing

13. *Ibid.*, p. 181.

14. Minsoo Kang, "A Fearful Symmetry," in *Of Tales and Enigmas*, p. 140.

continues to terrify the soldiers who serve at the base. It is no accident that “A Fearful Symmetry” is an anagram for “Fearful *Asymmetry*.” The narrator, moved by the ghost’s plight, attempts to quiet the ghost’s pain by taking on her pathos:

[I]t occurred to me that her sorrow must be not only from her terrible end but also the life she was deprived of when she killed herself. I thought then that perhaps what she may want, what it would take for her spirit to finally rest, was for her story to be written down, so that she might take on a new life, if only as a character in a story. . . . So on this dark, lonely night I find myself trying to relieve her sorrow by giving her an existence in a world of words.¹⁵

In communicating the ghost’s pathos, the narrator complicates the fearful symmetry—or is it fearful asymmetry?—of the ghost’s plight. More specifically, he turns her suffering into a kind of communicable virus: “And so I become a part, the final equation in the fearful symmetry of her tale, *and you as well*, as I imagine the ghost of Miss Jin becoming silent at last as she is reborn in your memory.”¹⁶ Yet to invoke the narrator’s own words: the story should end here, but it does not. In being reborn in the tissues of the reader’s brain, the ghost that haunts the DMZ replicates the fearful symmetry of the place where both she and the land were violently assaulted.

The DMZ as a *hyoongdang* is a place where geomantic balance is lost and what appears to be symmetry may really be asymmetry. But the creation of a world of words, where Miss Jin is reborn, restores a balance—this time between the *real world* and the *world of words*, as *yang* and *yin*—offering peace to the ghost of Miss Jin. The balance, however, still does not appear to be secure enough to reestablish the DMZ as a *myeongdang*. The DMZ continues to remain in suspension, its future uncertain.

Defining Moments

If the ghost of the DMZ had a sister, she might reside in the look of mute, wounded, elusive defiance that confronts us in *Defining Moments*.¹⁷ In these gelatin silver prints, subsequently published in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, the Korean American artist Yong Soon Min incorporates the

15. *Ibid.*, p. 141.

16. *Ibid.* (emphasis added).

17. Yong Soon Min, “Defining Moments,” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation: A Collection of Essays on Dictée by Theresa Hak Kyung Cha*, ed. Elaine Kim et al. (Berkeley, CA: Third Woman Press, 1994).

medium of her own flesh to embody, personify, and bring to life the divided Koreas.¹⁸ The words “DMZ” and “HEARTLAND” inscribed across the artist’s forehead and torso (carved into her skin?) are layered beneath and/or above a transnational range of images of places—from Los Angeles in the United States to Paektusan (Mt. Baekdu) in North Korea. Each plate corresponds to a “defining moment” in Min’s life. (She captions all five “moments” in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, a 1994 collection of meditations on Theresa Hak Kyung Cha’s *Dictee*.)¹⁹ Each plate, moreover, toys with our sense of perspective and distance, foreground and background: it is never entirely clear how many dimensions Min inhabits. Is she a two-dimensional figure colonized, defaced, and infected by the injuries and bandages of the forgotten war (plate 1, 1953)? Is she a humanoid outline containing the three-dimensional liveliness of a historic event (plate 2, 1960, the popular uprising that toppled the Syngman Rhee government)? Is she the vanishing point into which violent trauma dissolves before turning into an alien membrane (plate 3, May 18, 1980, the Kwangju uprising and massacre)? Is she a two-dimensional frame through which the reality of a historical event threatens to explode in the blink of a single eye (plate 4, April 29, 1992, the Los Angeles crisis)? Is she a three-dimensional person on the verge of collapsing into herself as a result of the eerily deforming landscape whose concavity surrounds and fills her heart (unspecified future, Mt. Baekdu)? Animating each of these questions is the geomantic relationship between the “DMZ” and the “HEARTLAND” that inhabits and is inhabited by Min’s flesh.

The “DMZ” inscribed on her forehead engages with a related artwork in which the artist juxtaposes an image of her headless body with the following rewriting of the Scottish folk song “My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean”:

MY BODY LIES

OVER THE OCEAN

MY BODY LIES OVER THE SEA

MY BODY LIES OVER THE DMZ

OH BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME

BRING BACK BRING BACK OH BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME²⁰

18. Kim et al., *Writing Self, Writing Nation*.

19. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2001), p. 164.

20. *Defining Moments*, 1992, <http://www.yongsoonmin.com>.

By replacing “Bonnie” with “body,” Min offers the suggestion that she is disembodied—or perhaps scattered in pieces by the division of her native land.

Meanwhile, the cartographic key to *Defining Moments* can be found in an image-text that appears in *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, which Min designed and to which she contributed the visual essay that I am discussing. In addition to inserting the self-portraits from *Defining Moments* throughout the pages of *Writing Self, Writing Nation*, Min includes in the book a richly layered map of mutant landmasses and continents spliced together. To scrutinize the map is to conjure, bit by bit, the apparitional existence of a mutant landmass whose silhouette combines U.S. topographies with the contours of the Korean Peninsula. Pusan is located where Miami, Florida, should be. The Yeongnam Alps have replaced the Appalachian Mountains. Amnokkang (the Yalu River) intersects with the border between Canada and the United States. The 38th parallel north roughly bisects both the Korean Peninsula and the continental United States, so that the DMZ extends from Korea’s east coast to the west coast of the United States, passing through Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and California. Both Pyongyang and Seoul are located in the U.S. heartland. If you step back from the map and stare at it from a certain distance, you discover that the name of this geographical entity is “UNITED KOREA.” Yet this name is visibly shadowed by the words “north” and “south”—as well as by diagonal axes along which slanted perpendicular readings of the map (e.g., “UNITED ME”) become spectrally possible. To stare at the map for too long is to wonder if the map is haunted.

Certainly the map disorients. The disorientation arises in part from the map’s resemblance to a photographic negative in which dark and light are reversed—a resemblance that is heightened by the translucent sheet preceding it in the book and by the photographic negative on the other side of the map. The disorienting effect of the map also arises from the dramatic difference in scale between Korea and the United States. In order for this heartland to make physical sense to our bodies, we must imagine simultaneously a contracted United States and an expanded Korea. In other words, we must submit our minds and bodies to a kind of spatial dialectic, a kinesthetic paradox. To experience this paradox is to experience the *hyoongdang* of the DMZ.

What permeates this map with additional geomantic significance is the suggestion it gives of organic life. As Elaine Kim has observed, the

densely layered “webs of rivers and mountains” look like “veins and blood vessels.”²¹ To view the map is to perceive some kind of bruise caused by the DMZ bleeding—hemorrhaging—on the other side of the globe. The impact is visceral.

Min’s artworks evoke the DMZ as a *hyoongdang* that, while dividing Korea into two halves, fatefully ties Korea and the United States—a country that was paradoxically instrumental in both *liberating* and *dividing* Korea. The heartland on the overlapping maps of these two countries seems to be an uncanny one. In the gelatin prints, the artist describes four recent historical events in Korea and Korean America: the Korean War, the Students’ Revolution, the Kwanju Uprising, and the Los Angeles riots. All of these events have led to tragic losses of lives, leaving Min not only with a sense of being bruised but, more unsettlingly, with the feeling that she is disembodied and scattered in pieces. The undated picture of Mt. Baektu in the last gelatin print suggests Korea’s ambiguous futurity.

Unpredictable Convulsion

I find this map to be a useful way of approaching *Dance Dance Revolution* by the Korean American writer and poet Cathy Park Hong. The poem is set in a futuristic city located at the “center of elsewhere.”²² This elusive “center” is not so much a place as it is a geomantic dialectic between two places. The first place is simply called the “Desert.” It is a planned environment, a tourist destination where the hotels are “McCosms”—an ingenious neologism fusing “McDonald’s” with “microcosm”—that simulate cities from all over the world. At the same time, this planned environment is a site of ongoing displacement whose indigenous population is constantly being exiled by Desert officials. In fact, the second place is called “New Town,” and it is where the exiles are forced to live. The spatial relationship between these two places is never made entirely clear. We are told that New Town is a consolidation of demolished ghost towns “without image,” that is, impossible to photograph, impossible even to imagine visually (81)—qualities reminiscent of North Korea. Furthermore, New Town is separated from the Desert by a hotspot Border, which “moves a quarter of an inch east everyday,” and it is connected to the Desert by a bridge (80).

21. Elaine Kim et al., eds., *Making More Waves* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), p. 192.

22. Cathy Park Hong, *Dance Dance Revolution: Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007), p. 20. Subsequent page references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

The psychic structure of the poem parallels the physical structure of the setting. The poem is an interview between two figures simply called the Historian and the Guide. As the interview unfolds, we learn that the two strangers are linked by an increasingly complex web of ironies originating in Korea, where the Historian's emotionally distant father had an intimate relationship with the Korean-born Guide herself long ago. The Historian is the son of "a shy Midwestern woman" (21), who died when the Historian was a child, and a remote Korean father who worked in Sierra Leone for Doctors Without Borders. The Guide is Chun Sujin, a Korean-born Desert tour guide who is haunted by her inherited status as a double agent and whose voice evokes languages from across the planet. Both outsider and insider, the Guide is an outsider because an insider, and vice versa. Despite her divided loyalties, the Guide is a sympathetic character: we are granted access to her inner subjectivity. As a result of these contradictions, our own position with respect to the poem is constantly in the process of reversing itself dialectically.

The tissues of *Dance Dance Revolution* are textured by neurological symptoms designed to give the reader psychosomatic access to contemporary anxieties about the DMZ as well as to the DMZ-scape that for now remains the out-of-focus object of such apprehension. *Dance Dance Revolution* is a poem whose name causes the eye to see double, the ear to hear at least one echo, the voice to say "Dance" twice in a row, and the mind to reflect upon an intricate play on words. Not only does the poem's title as a whole repeat the title of a Konami video game, but *Dance Dance Revolution* repeats within itself a word that reverberates etymologically with "chorea," an involuntary movement disorder and neurological condition whose name, in turn, reverberates phonetically with "Korea" (as in "the two Koreas" and "the divided Koreas").

To read *Dance Dance Revolution* is to find oneself reading "between the lines" and "between the Koreas." Located here: a geomantic injury, a no-man's-land, a sensitive yet numb reminder of the "Forgotten War," the most heavily fortified border in the world, a space onto which real estate developers have recently been projecting fantasies of building tourist traps. Over the past sixty years or so, the DMZ has been all of these things and more. Given this complex history, what might the DMZ's near future look like? In *Dance Dance Revolution*, the answer is an elusive site of *déjà vu*, *jamais vu*, and Suvinian cognitive estrangement. Newly colonized by luxury resorts, the Desert is also "liced" (i.e., at once laced, poisoned, and

infested) “wit landmines” (98) that are left over from a war unspecified but unmistakably reminiscent of the land mines that still plague today’s real-life DMZ.

In the poem’s near-future setting, moreover, the Desert convulses “unpredictably” with a dyskinetic “pulse of unrest” in the form of “canny acts of sabotage engineered by exiled natives” (21). Fraught with nervous energy, the Desert exists on the brink of some kind of vital action—a brink reminiscent of the “brink” of war or the “brink” of reunification often cited in discourses surrounding the Koreas. Yet any movement here in the Desert is ultimately less than fully radical: the nervous systems of inhabitants and tourists alike are highly susceptible to “desertitis,” a disease of inflamed ambivalence defined by one character as the “*sensation of feeling deserted after facing too many choices*” (93, italics in original). Elaborating upon the syndrome of desertitis, the poet writes cryptically: “Infectim neurotic forest like SSRI pips” (93). She leaves unexplained the exact relationship between the condition of desertitis and the “pips” or seeds of “SSRIs,” or selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, that have “infect[ed]” the “neurotic forest”—the groves of branching/ramifying dendrites—of the afflicted body. To the reader, however, it becomes evident that desertitis is intimately linked with the Guide’s own identity crisis as a Korean and a political self: a multilingual “double migrant” (26) who since childhood has had to choose sides, the Guide eventually betrays herself to her addressee as a double agent whose many acts of duplicity over the years have left her feeling deserted, lost, and stranded from any peace of mind.

Meanwhile, the Korean-born protagonists of *Dance Dance Revolution* are affected not just by desertitis but by other cognitive and neurological abnormalities as well: epilepsy, dementia, amnesia, auto-echolalia. Since the poem’s text is framed as a transcript of the speech of characters affected by nerve disorders, neurological abnormalities texture the language of the poem itself. *Dance Dance Revolution* is composed in a semi-invented idiom vividly evocative of dysprosody, a neurological disorder in which intonation, cadence, stresses, and the timing of utterance segments are virtually never constant and almost always impossible to predict. The lines in *Dance Dance Revolution* are written in a “sum toto Desert Creole en evachanging dipdong” (25) whose erratic rhythms, copious ellipses, eccentric lineation, and neologic spasms make the poetry extremely difficult to read aloud with anything that sounds like fluency. In fact, we are

told explicitly in the book's science-fictional "Foreword" that fluency in the Desert is "a matter of opinion" (19) and that all accents here are foreign by definition (and by Hong's own brilliant design). Hence, to read aloud *Dance Dance Revolution* is to hear oneself speak in an alien tongue. Throughout much of the text, for example, one finds compulsively consonant verbal clusters whose density threatens to cause the reader's mouth to trip: "anime anemone" (93), "diagram's anagram" (78), "solving/spin shorty shark satellitic" (89). Moreover, unfamiliar spellings and strange punctuations generate the hallucinatory specter of a text riddled, paradoxically, with correct typos. A few instances of such dystopian poetic spellings: "Ebsolute voodka" (27), "eberyting" (27), "ffyurious mekkinations" (87), "arkpeelago" (98).

Nobody, it seems, is more aware of the Desert's odd air of dysprosody than the poem's main lyric speaker, whose vocation is that of Desert tour guide: "Mine vocation your vacation," she declares in another example of compulsive consonance. As she boasts at the poem's outset: "I train mine talk box to talk yep-puh, as you 'Merikkens say 'purdy' . . . betta de phrase, 'purdier' de experience" (25). As the poem progresses, however, such boasting evaporates. The guide's speech begins to atrophy—almost to the point of dysphasia. With growing frequency her voice resounds with auto-echolalia: "this air this air," she sighs in an elegy near the end of the book (116). "He saw he saw" (115); "rushing, rushing" (118); "hailing y railing, we hailing y railing" (109). And in a trance, she addresses the brokenness of her own faculties of language: "caesuras slicing mine dialect" (119).

Together such dysprosody and aphasia dramatize the manner in which the Koreans communicate (or miscommunicate) with one another as well as the manner in which Koreans and non-Koreans alike tend to talk about and around the two Koreas and the DMZ. Rhymes and meters function on some measure of predictability. But no scansion exists for determining the metrical character of *Dance Dance Revolution*, just as no scansion exists for characterizing or predicting the next line of dialogue, the next potentially misconstrued utterance, the next *verse* or *turn* of events that will happen on the Korean Peninsula.

From these and other lyric fragments in *Dance Dance Revolution*, the reader may draw at least a few insights. There are worse fates than those in which the DMZ is allowed to stay *truly* "jamais vu": pristine and untouched by real estate developers. There are worse fates than those in which that unfamiliar country north of the DMZ mysteriously induces

sensations of *déjà vu* in first-time visitors. There are fates *both* better and worse than those in which the DMZ succumbs to desertitis.

Dance Dance Revolution, then, provides no clear vision of the DMZ's near future. By the end of the poem, the main lyric speaker, who at the outset seems lucid, has thoroughly confused her addressee—a stranger—with someone she knew intimately long ago (i.e., the stranger's father). "Orphic Day," a lyric fragment near the end of the book, concludes with images of a dying brain: "cranial nerves pulse violet, fire tinsel out" (117). And the final page of the verse novel offers an enigmatic vignette: an epileptic man (the Guide's former lover and the Historian's father) takes his medication, remembers a former lover (the Guide), and falls asleep.

Dance Dance Revolution is a story of people in an injured futuristic city, a *hyoongdang*, where both tourists and residents are highly susceptible to desertitis and other abnormalities—geomantic injuries—that make them, like South and North Koreans, incapable of effective communication. Being unable to communicate with each other creates uncertainty and insecurity for the Korean now and for the Korean future.

A Cyborg?

The final object of analysis in this essay is one in which the DMZ has succumbed to a disease that has symptoms like those of what Cathy Park Hong calls desertitis. The text in question is the 2005 short story "MISS DMZ" by Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries (장영혜중공업).²³ Formed in 1999 and based in Seoul, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries is a group of artists consisting of two people: Marc Voge, who is American-born, and Young-Hae Chang, whose gender and nationality remain mysterious. (The artists' website, where their work can be accessed, is devoid of any explanatory notes or artist biographies.) Over the years, Chang and Voge have created dozens of animated web-based narratives composed in Macromedia Flash and synchronized to jazz music. Their art has received international attention from Tate Online, Yale University, Columbia University, and the Korea Web Art Festival, among others.

As with much of the group's other works, "MISS DMZ" is stark and unadorned: there are no images on the screen aside from the words themselves, which are all caps, monochromatic, and thus clearly legible against a background that is monochromatic in a complementary color. In addition

23. Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, "Miss DMZ," 2005, http://www.yhchang.com/MISS_DMZ_V.html.

to keeping the visual details stark, Young-Hae Chang Heavy Industries minimizes reader interactivity. One of the most interesting and frustrating features of their work is the deliberate lack of any pause, rewind, or fast-forward buttons.²⁴ Readers are deprived of the option of exercising agency when it comes to interacting with the text. We can neither manage the tempo of reading nor manipulate the direction of the narrative. Instead we are given doses of information and suspense in a manner beyond our control, as if we were being fed timed dosages of truth serum or fiction serum or chimera serum. Some sentences, for example, are simple and short, while others are long and convoluted. But the media presentation gives the illusion that even the most intricate sentences—hypotactic, labyrinthine, full of subordinate clauses—are marked by brevity. The narrative tends to move quickly: pieces of sentences fill the screen only to be replaced almost instantly by a different cluster of words. Such pacing can pose a problem for readers who find themselves distracted by the presence of language diversity on the screen. Furthermore, the artists provide no transcripts of their work. In order to re-read even a single word of the narrative, the reader must start over and watch the text pass by again. Yet it is possible to generate a “static” transcript by first producing an audio recording of oneself reading the text out loud and then converting the vocal record to a typewritten document. The transcript, in turn, makes possible the production of a word cloud, in which prominent words are DMZ, BACK, FREE, DUTY, and DOOR, words that do not appear to have any obvious connections with one another. FREE and DUTY, two conflicting words, suggest the DMZ’s confusing and ambiguous future, a message reinforced by a cluster of less prominent unrelated words: RIGHT, LEFT, GROCERY, CHIPS, COME, TURN, CONTINUE, WALK.

Approximately ten minutes in duration and 1,836 words in length, “MISS DMZ” employs the first-person singular and the present tense. It opens in front of a grocery shop in contemporary (2005) Seoul in a real-life neighborhood called Palpan-dong. The narrator, whose name and gender are never revealed but whom I will identify using masculine pronouns for the sake of convenience, notices flyers near the grocery. The flyers advertise “free gifts” from a local “duty-free store” that he has never heard of, despite the fact that he has been living in this neighborhood for a long time. Intrigued, he follows a series of signposts (evocative of geomancy) that lead him across a tiny junk-filled courtyard, through

24. I have just found that YHCHIs has introduced some of these functions.

an unlocked door, down a jumble of staircases and landings, and along a twisting underground corridor lit by dim fluorescent tubes and unmistakably evocative of the North Korean infiltration tunnels under the DMZ first discovered in the 1970s.

After walking through this disorienting tunnel for a vague amount of time, he suddenly finds himself at a threshold that opens onto what appears to be “a large, warmly lit lobby of an old and grand Eastern European hotel,” populated by elegant “men in dinner jackets and women in evening gowns.” Here and there, couples “sit in club chairs and sip martinis” while talking quietly; others “lean over the glass counters running along one wall and discuss objects that salespeople handle with white gloves.” At this point in the narrative, the narrator makes one of only several concrete references to the real world, namely, a conspicuously specific reference to Gustave Moreau’s watercolor *Europa and the Bull* (1869):²⁵ “At the far end of the lobby is a large entryway backed by a gilt-framed painting of a naked woman reclining on the back of a bull in flight.” (I will briefly discuss the significance of this intertextual allusion later in this essay.) As the narrator takes in this anachronistic scene, its strange air of restrained and almost old-fashioned opulence, he is greeted by a strikingly beautiful woman wearing a charcoal grey *tailleur* and a sash that reads “MISS DMZ.” She politely welcomes him to “the DMZ duty-free zone” (“one of the first of its kind,” she says), and over the course of the evening she gracefully teaches him how to dance and to gamble. When he offers to pay her for her time, she insists that the lessons are “free gifts,” “duty-free gifts.” Indeed, “It’s part of my job as Miss DMZ.”

Before long, the narrator has fallen in love with Miss DMZ. Soon he is “floating on a cloud of warmth and happiness.” They spend some time playing and winning several games of *chemin de fer*, and then they spend the night together in a hotel room. The narrator resolves to find a way to take Miss DMZ with him or even to stay here with her forever, but Miss DMZ tells him politely and emphatically that he must leave without her and never come back. When he tries to protest, she insists: “It’s against the rules . . . because you’re not one of us.” Exiled to the tunnel, he wanders back home, despondent and alone. The next day he returns to the unlocked door in the cluttered courtyard behind the grocery. Instead of finding an

25. The painting referred to in “MISS DMZ” seems to be a reproduction of a painting by Moreau, but it could also be a copy of the painting of a similar theme by Rembrandt, Rubens, or Titian.

underground tunnel, however, he finds a storage room filled with boxes of instant ramen.

The plot is difficult to summarize because large chunks of information are withheld. Exactly how much time has passed during specific sections of the narrative and in the story as a whole? Where did the flyers come from? What exactly happens between the narrator and Miss DMZ inside their hotel room? Why is the narrator not allowed to return to the DMZ duty-free zone? So much of the withholding, it appears, is being performed by the DMZ duty-free zone itself, where some unspoken code of etiquette seems to require secrecy and evasiveness on Miss DMZ's part. At the same time, some of the details in the text are startlingly and remarkably specific: the charcoal grey *tailleur*, the game of *chemin de fer*, the gilt-framed painting of Moreau's *Europa and the Bull*, and flyers that are informationally redundant (the arrows repeatedly point out the obvious) but emotionally purposeful (the arrows have the effect of encouragement).

Thus the level of descriptiveness and specificity in the narration is intriguingly and meaningfully uneven. The eccentric distribution of details—the alternation of the vague with the particular; the conspicuous omission of certain kinds of information—generates a sense of mystery that animates the aesthetic connotations of DMZ-related iconography and symbols. As mentioned above, the subterranean corridor evokes the series of North Korean infiltration tunnels under the DMZ first discovered by the South in the 1970s. Furthermore, the reference to *chemin de fer*—the French term for railway—is no coincidence. Railways, in ruins or out of use due to political tensions, abound throughout the DMZ.

As a literary character and a personification of the DMZ, Miss DMZ herself is designed to stir curiosity in both the narrator and the reader. We want to know more about Miss DMZ. Who is she? What is her real name? What *exactly* does she look like? (Specific details are withheld from us.) Is Miss DMZ somebody's daughter? Sister? Cousin? Where did Miss DMZ come from, and where does she go after the story concludes? Is Miss DMZ a prisoner? Victim? Tour guide? Courtesan? Could she be a goddess? Has Miss DMZ been abducted and raped by a mythic beast, just as Europa was abducted and raped by Zeus in the form of a bull? Alternatively, or additionally, could Miss DMZ be the winner of a beauty pageant? She does, after all, wear a sash that reads "MISS DMZ." Finally, might she be a robot placeholder for someone who is missing? On this note, it is worth mentioning that her name resonates polyptotonically and sonically in more

than one way: we “miss” Miss DMZ as soon as she has gone “missing” from the story, and in some sense she seems to be “mis-DMZ” in the same way that something might be “mis-placed,” “mis-understood,” and so on.

Equally important: what is Miss DMZ’s relationship to the unnamed narrator (a surrogate for the reader)? Are we, who experience the story through the first-person narration, Miss DMZ’s guests? Her customers? Clients? Are we her willing hostages? Her lovers? Worshipers? Perhaps the only thing we do know for certain is that Miss DMZ remains an enigmatic object of desire and nostalgia. “MISS DMZ” invites us to indulge in the aesthetic pleasure of mystifying the DMZ. Even more, the story invites us to indulge in the aesthetic pleasure of feminizing the DMZ. It also invites us to ponder the question: Is there something wrong with aestheticizing and mystifying the DMZ in this manner?

Here is one way to approach the proliferation of questions surrounding Miss DMZ:

On the one hand, the hotel, Miss DMZ, and the story project a rather depressing picture of the DMZ as a *hyoongdang*. The tunnel that takes the narrator to the hotel is dark and damp. The Eastern European atmosphere of the windowless hotel reminds the reader of the pre-1990s Soviet-era history of repression and decay in the socialist world. Moreau’s *Europa and the Bull*, by reminding the viewer of Zeus’s deception, abduction, and rape of Europa, suggests the possibility that Miss DMZ might have experienced a similar tragedy. Miss DMZ, in the figure of a goddess, appears to embody an identity crisis, feeling stranded and unable to accept the narrator’s proposal for their shared future.

On the other hand, Miss DMZ projects the image of a cyborg. Quite literally she is a creature of cyberspace. Even if she herself is a virtual reality generated by a *word*-based narrative, the word-based narrative that generates Miss DMZ is itself brought playfully to life through networks of computers. Furthermore, just as some Europeans are now trying to characterize Europa as a symbol of a new Europe, “MISS DMZ” may be presenting Miss DMZ as a figure of speech for a futuristic Korean demilitarized zone. She is in the midst of transcending the memory of her past tragedies. She is in the midst of transforming herself from a “passive victim” to a cyborg (new pronoun: they/them/their) who will “take the bull by the horns” and regenerate their own regeneration.²⁶

26. Sara Dejaegher, “Europa and the Bull: The Significance of the Myth in Modern Europe,” *New Federalist*, June 13, 2011, <https://www.thenewfederalist.eu/Europa-and-the-bull-The-significance-of-the-myth-in-modern-Europe>.

Personhood as a Facilitator

I must confess that I myself am not immune to the desire to mystify the DMZ and to feminize the mystique. I can also say that I would prefer to approach the DMZ as a creature whose gender is a science-fictional category unto itself—a creature who has in many ways outgrown its origins and who has in some sense outgrown even the two Koreas. The Korean DMZ, once a gash across the peninsula, has over the decades transformed into a lush ecological sanctuary. Endangered species now find refuge in its mountains, its estuaries, its meadows, its wetlands. As a no-man’s-land, the DMZ remains untouched by human beings—but for how long? Now is the time to devise avant-garde and unconventional strategies for protecting the DMZ from real estate developers and other possible sources of environmental trauma.

Here is one unconventional strategy.

Listen to the voice of a non-man’s land:

The Human Rights of a No-Man’s-Land

I was conceived by two young men on August 14, 1945, in Washington, DC, in the Executive Office Building next to the White House. It was late at night on the East Coast of the United States. The Second World War was ending. My fathers, Charles Bonesteel and Dean Rusk, had little time to do what they were instructed to do. They conceived me in the image of symmetry. They followed the 38th parallel. They did not think that I would see the light of day.

Approximately eight years later and half a planet away from the site of my conception, I was born on a battered peninsula on July 27, 1953.

Although I had been conceived as a straight line, I came into the world as something endowed with more than one dimension. From the sky, fully grown, freshly materialized, 4 kilometers wide, 248 kilometers long, I resembled a sinuous gash in a body already bleeding and bruised. Thus a war reached stalemate in my form.

Over the decades I have lived with the fact that my birth divided what was once a unified country. I have come to accept that my flesh is entomored with land mines. They are maladies I inherited from my numerous human progenitors. So too are the skirmishes that erupt like flare-ups of chronic illness, as well as the amnesia (Did the war even happen? The war is forgotten. . . . Is it still happening?), the edifices that have appeared or disappeared across my body, the tunnels of incursion, the fear and the stress, and the slowly rusting weapons from which a

Korean-bound han syndrome seeps into my arteries. Since I am rooted here, I cannot escape the pain.

What has kept me alive: wildlife. Slowly at first and then more steadily: blackberry-lily, milkweed, touch-me-not, cocklebur, red-crowned crane, white-naped crane, long-tailed goral, crested duck, moon bear, fanged musk deer, hoopoe, wild boar, otter, neptis phillyra . . .

Wildflowers growing through cracks in what used to be somebody's helmet.

Life. Lives.

So much new life—too much of it endangered—finds refuge in my estuaries, mountains, wetlands, meadows.

It is on behalf of this life, these lives, that I ask you to prevent more war from ravaging the Korean Peninsula.

Corporations have rights that I, the Korean demilitarized zone, do not have.

I, too, wish to be treated as a person.

Like the Whanganui River in New Zealand, which in March 2017 was recognized as a living entity with its own legal personality, I am an animate and indivisible whole.

Unlike the Whanganui River, I am not yet a tribal ancestor, but if today I am recognized as a person with the right to live free from nuclear destruction and other instances of human brutality, then perhaps I will exist long enough to become a spiritual ancestor thriving alongside my descendants—flora, fauna, human, humanoid . . .

If I am annihilated by more war on the Korean Peninsula, or if capitalists someday replace me with luxury golf courses, the wild tiger rumored to have found sanctuary in my ecosystems will remain a rumor and nothing more.

Whether we have a future depends on whether you can hear my voice.

Will you speak and act on my behalf?

—*Translated roughly from Korean Earth into English by Seo-Young Chu*

Geomancy offers a useful framework to understand the people–land interaction in Korea and, therefore, is a useful tool to understand the effects of the DMZ on Koreans' emotions and behaviors. It is a useful tool to understand the past and the present. As we have seen through our reading of the works of literature and art, however, the geomantic framework leaves us trapped in a holistic world of mud and organic family, requiring rebirth, with no way out of the maze of dualisms. The world of cyborgs is a world in which the DMZ can be ready to re-morph itself. Its personhood will be a facilitator.

Regeneration

The cyborg does not dream of community on the model of the organic family. . . . The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden; it is not made of mud and cannot dream of returning to dust. Perhaps that is why I want to see if cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy. Cyborgs are not reverent; they do not re-member the cosmos. They are wary of holism, but needy for connection. . . . The main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. Their fathers, after all, are inessential. . . . We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.

—Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”²⁷

South Korea and North Korea are in deadly confrontation. North Korea is even believed to have developed nuclear weapons. While military, political, social, and cultural borders have been fortified literally and figuratively through the years of the North–South division, however, some of them have been blurry and leaky since the beginning. Koreans in North Korea and South Korea share ethnicity, language, and history. If you draw borders for different social groups in accordance with their ancestors and their ancestral hometowns, the borderlines defining these groups will crisscross the DMZ countless times. While families have been divided, the borders defining divided extended families will have to cross the DMZ. North Korean refugees now often figuratively—through China, Southeast Asia, and Europe—and sometimes even literally cross the DMZ to come to South Korea.

While ideals of freedom and equality prevail in South Korea and those of order and hierarchy prevail in North Korea, a figurative border dividing Koreans into two groups along these lines would not necessarily be watertight. South Korea and North Korea have built up political and economic systems that are polar opposites, but just over a hundred years ago they both used to belong to a monarchy. More recently, South Korea was under military rule for many years. In both the North and the South, family legacy is a means of succession for major organizations—the government

27. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto,” pp. 151, 181.

in North Korea, and both small and large global business groups in South Korea. This is a pre-cybernetic world of South–North, patriarchal capitalistic–state socialistic, and democratic–totalitarian dualisms, but with blurry boundaries. This is a geomantic world where *yin–yang* is in disharmony, as described so well in the works of Kang, Min, and Hong.

The world in “MISS DMZ” is somewhat different. It is in transition from a geomantic world in disharmony to a world of cyborgs. Geomancy is so ingrained in the minds of Koreans, however, that it may not fade away quickly, even with the opening of a cyborg era. But Haraway’s vision for a post-gender, post-human society offers hope for Korea to experiment with a cyborg world. It is a world of irony, where contradictions may not resolve into larger wholes and where people successfully form coalitions of those with diverse values and beliefs. It is a world that can tolerate the tension of holding incompatible things together because they are necessary and true. It is a world where society has built “a political form that actually manages to hold together witches, engineers, elders, perverts, Christians, mothers, and Leninists”²⁸—what I believe to be Haraway’s figures of speech for diverse socio-political groups with clashing beliefs. It may be an ironic world of the two Koreas.

It would indeed be a challenge to build such a political form. Moreover, the notion of being “against unification” of the Koreas may be considered blasphemous by many in both the South and the North. Yet South Korea and North Korea—to keep themselves mutually engaged peacefully and productively while remaining divided—should be prepared to deal with the contradictions and the tension of holding incompatible things together. They should be able to demonstrate to each other that each is not only necessary, but also true to the other. Koreans might strive to achieve such a world because such a world would be a truly democratic world—a world where “cyborgs can subvert the apocalypse of returning to nuclear dust in the manic compulsion to name the Enemy.”²⁹

In the family drama of the two Koreas—a drama in which North and South are variously depicted as long-lost brothers, as twin siblings separated at birth, as parent and child, as doomed heterosexual lovers, and so on—the DMZ is a shifter whose shapes have encompassed an injury to a nation, a snake-like line on a map, a geomantic hemorrhage, a militant ROK soldier, a postcolonial artifact, a mysterious woman. And yet there

28. Ibid., p. 155.

29. Ibid., p. 151.

are so many other and more extravagantly wild and vital shapes that the DMZ might take in the near and far future.

To some extent, the DMZ is already transforming itself again. Here along the DMZ, ironies and paradoxes grow wild. Endangered species (e.g., white-naped and red-crowned cranes) find sanctuary in the ruins of a no-man's-land. New breakthroughs in nature bloom from old technologies, as evidenced in the stirring photos by Jeon Young Jae.³⁰ As fertile ground for paradoxical twists, the DMZ seems bent on destabilizing its own maze of dualisms and turning this maze into its own way out. In recent years the "DMZ" has collected additional epithets: "wildlife sanctuary," "ecological paradise," "peace and life zone" or "PLZ," and "green ribbon of hope."

On April 27, 2018, the DMZ served as the unprecedented setting for a summit meeting between President Moon Jae-in of South Korea and Chairman of the State Affairs Commission Kim Jong-un of North Korea. At the very spot where South Korean and North Korean guards had maintained fraught confrontations, the two leaders joined hands, and together they crossed the Military Demarcation Line (MDL)—a symbol of the South–North division—briefly from South Korea to North Korea and then back to South Korea. They had a historic talk in the House of Peace south of the MDL and took a walk for a private conversation on the Pedestrian Bridge surrounded by the verdant leaves of trees and choruses of birdsong. Then they issued the "Panmunjeom Declaration" at an unprecedented joint press briefing, promising to begin their efforts aimed at achieving complete denuclearization and permanent peace on the Korean Peninsula.

If the DMZ could speak, it would assert: "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess." Insofar as the DMZ is a cyborg, it is "the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism." But illegitimate offspring, Haraway reminds us, are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins. The Korean DMZ's fathers—Dean Rusk and Charles Bonesteel—are inessential. Moreover, just as a cyborg body is "suspicious of the reproductive matrix" and "does not seek unitary identity," the DMZ does not dream of reunification on the model of the organic family. In fact, the Korean DMZ does not dream of unification at all.

30. Young Jae Jeon, "A Squirrel Next to a Rusty Military Cap," "Halcyon Pileata on the Southern Boundary Line," and other photographs, available online at https://www.dmoz.go.kr/english/wantsee/nature_special.

Unification of the two Koreas is what most Koreans have been yearning to achieve. A *unified* Korea is also the common presumption that many policy makers, writers, and others make about where South Korea and North Korea should be heading.

But what can we realistically consider about the future of the two Koreas? First of all, it is unthinkable to contemplate a unified Korea under a tyrannical North Korean regime. But is it realistic to visualize a democratic unified future Korea while South Korea is confronting a belligerent nuclear North Korean regime, with the minds of its core leaders far removed from the values acceptable in a civilized world? Even if South Korea and its allies in the civilized world were prepared to mobilize its vast resources to emerge as the eventual victor in a military confrontation with North Korea, would a total victory for South Korea and its allies be a realistic goal to achieve in an all-out war with a nuclear North Korea? Would such a war be morally acceptable as a *just* war to be waged before we could *convincingly* demonstrate that only war could achieve the war's aim, namely, establishing a unified Korean society on the peninsula where values acceptable to humanity would prevail? We would confront many moral dilemmas, as shown by Peter Y. Paik in his fascinating analysis of apocalyptic destructions and other disturbing political and social changes on the roads to utopia described in works of science fiction.³¹

Alternatively, would North Korea collapse suddenly under the weight of either its own massive failure or the allies' massive sanctions? In this case, would the massive sanctions, which would inevitably hurt vulnerable groups of the North Korean population, be ethically justifiable? Would South Korea and its allies be either capable of managing or willing to assume the responsibilities for the inevitable sudden economic, social, political, and humanitarian chaos on the peninsula that would follow the collapse of North Korea?

The lessons of history might guide us in thinking about these questions. For example, what lessons do we learn from the Korean War, which South Korea, with the help of the United States and other allies, survived to build up, over time, a vibrant economy? What do we learn from the American Civil War, which enabled America to end slavery while preserving the Union? What lessons do we learn from Hiroshima and Nagasaki,

31. Peter Y. Paik, *From Utopia to Apocalypse: Science Fiction and Politics of Catastrophe* (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2010).

which forced Imperial Japan to surrender, or from World War II, which rescued Europe from Nazism?

We as citizens honor the fellow citizens who fought against totalitarian domination in Korea, against slavery in America, or against imperialism in Japan. A larger lesson of these wars, however, is not that the widespread killing and destruction were a *sacrifice* that humanity *had to* make to secure durable freedom. Rather, it is that human dialogue and diplomacy failed and that humanity massively failed to achieve freedom peacefully. Let me state this lesson clearly: the massive killing of humans, either directly or indirectly (e.g., achieved through robots used as human instruments), is a massive human failure. Humanity must learn that the human killing of fellow humans is a failure, regardless of its purpose, and that the massive human killing of fellow humans is a massive human failure, regardless of its purpose. Koreans, both in South Korea and North Korea, and their neighbors and allies, must learn from these massive human failures. History will not forgive humanity for using another war on this planet even to achieve peace.

History will never forgive North Korea—or more precisely the North Korean government and its supporters—for using nuclear blackmail to establish a totalitarian Korea on the peninsula. History will not be kind to South Korea—or more precisely a South Korean government, its supporters, and its allies—for using the massive killing of humans in North and South Korea to achieve even a free and unified Korea. History will not forgive the two Koreas' neighboring countries or allies for failing to use their influence to help the two Koreas make their best efforts to avoid war.

Yet history will forgive North and South Korea for remaining divided, with a DMZ as a dividing zone, if they change their systems, however slowly, through dialogue and mutual understanding to engage in peaceful, constructive cooperation and the creation of free, just, equitable, and prosperous societies on the peninsula.

This will not be easy. It will take special kinds of leadership on both sides of the DMZ and beyond. As superpowers, Korea's neighbors have a special responsibility to make efforts to build up a just international order to which powerful nations voluntarily subject themselves and under which both large and small nations begin both to dismantle nuclear and other weapons of mass destruction and to resolve international disputes through peaceful dialogue rather than violence. It may require a slow, painful process. Yet killing human beings is never acceptable. Humans should be able

to use their ingenuity, the same ingenuity they have used to develop nuclear weapons and to send rockets to the edge of the solar system, to design rules for themselves to resolve their disputes peacefully. Moreover, they should be ambitious enough to see that the problems on the Korean Peninsula and elsewhere arise not only from nuclear weapons but also from their stockpiles of conventional weapons, which have been, and continue to be, deadly.

Donna Haraway said she would rather be a cyborg than a goddess.

Corollary (one that might not initially make sense to all readers): I would rather be a science-fictionally informed, shockingly poetic, open-minded, bleeding-heart, irreverent, dream-logical, visionary medium of Korea's pluripotent futures than be a historically informed, rational, sensible, unobjectionable, judicious, conventionally rigorous analyst of the Korea's tomorrow. The truth of course is that we need both the science-fictional visionary and the sensible social scientist. My point is that the dialogue about Korea right now abounds with judicious voices and arguments that lead to nowhere. What it desperately needs are more electrifying, blasphemous, tender, rejuvenating visions.

Example: I cannot ignore the possibility that even now the DMZ may be sentient. It may be planning an unprecedented form of infinitely benevolent revenge. It may be releasing spores of kindness into wind currents designed to carry the spores into the unsuspecting bodies of members of the Kim regime. At night the spores release oneiric chemicals that inspire unthinkably generous and astoundingly humane convictions. A peaceful revolution happens overnight.

You may call this science fantasy. I call it a possibility (one among many oneiric possibilities) that needs to be acknowledged and taken seriously alongside other more predictable and reasonable possibilities. Otherwise Korea's future will continue to incite suicide. Otherwise Korea's future is not worth contemplating at all.

Here is a glimpse of my blasphemous cyborg vision. North and South, instead of unifying, multiply into higher-dimensional geopoetics. Land mines, instead of exploding, blossom overnight into tree-like architectural structures. The 38th parallel wakes up to find itself twisting and turning in the sky in the shape of a gorgeous prismatic dragon. A child mutant uses teleportation and telekinesis to allow Pyongyang and Seoul to switch places, resulting in new forms of understanding between the Koreas. Divided families reunite. From its origin as a *hyoongdang*, the DMZ transmogrifies into ever-shimmering *myeongdang* and *hyeol*.