

Dreaming of subversion in a foreign tongue:

Good Mocking Bird

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Abstract

This paper aims to present an overview of Kyungrim Lim Jang's *Good Mocking Bird* (2020) by providing an analysis of the project in its socio-political context. *Good Mocking Bird* explores the paradox that lies ahead of the subordinated subject and their attempts to speak freely with a split tongue. The paper begins with historical archives and theories on language confinement of the minority bodies made by scholars of history, linguistics and law. Timelines/spheres of the suggested materials range from the late 19th century to contemporary. In the later part, the paper places *Good Mocking Bird* within the stream of artworks created in the past by other female Asian artists and different methodologies adopted in their works in their presentations of self. Detailed view on the components of *Good Mocking Bird* could be found at the end of the document.

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1. Introduction: Standard language ideology

일본어가 ‘고쿠고(國語)’라고 불리우게 된 것은, 메이지(明治) 시대에 이르러서부터이다. 사실 ‘고쿠고’라는 말 자체가 메이지 중반까지는 별로 사용되지 않았었다. 그런데 대일본제국헌법의 발포에서 청일전쟁에 이르는 과정에서 국가의식이 고양되면서, 점차 ‘고쿠고’라는 의식이 정착되었다. 그 때 결정적인 역할을 한 사람이 바로 동경제국대학 교수였던 우에다 카즈도시(上田万年)였다.

1894 년 6 월에 3 년 반 동안의 유럽 유학을 마치고 귀국한 우에다는, 그 해 10 월에 ‘고쿠고와 국가’라는 강연을 한다. 때는 마침 청일전쟁이 발발한 직후였다. 우에다는 국가를 정치적 제도만으로 생각하지 않고, ‘국민’ 전체를 통합하는 유기체로 파악했다. 그리고 그 유기체에 생명을 부여하는 가장 중요한 것을 언어로 보았다. 이같이 ‘국가와 불가분하게 맺어진 언어를, 우에다는 ‘고쿠고’라고 불렀다. 우에다는 ‘일본어는 일본 사람들의 정신적 혈액’이며, ‘일본의 국체는 이 정신적인 혈액으로 유지된다’고 뜻을 밝혔다.

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It was in the Meiji period that the Japanese Language started to be called the ‘national language (Gokugo)’. The term was not popularly used until the mid-Meiji period. However, during the time between the introduction of Japanese imperial constitution and Sino-Japanese war, where nationalism raised its head, the consciousness of the ‘national language’ settled. The one who took a decisive role in the process was Ueda Kazudoshi, then a professor of Tokyo Imperial University.

Ueda came back to Japan in June of 1894 after finishing 3 and a half years of studies abroad in Europe. That same fall, Ueda made a lecture under the title ‘national language (Gokugo) and nation’. Timely enough, it was after the Sino-Japanese war had begun. Ueda recognized the state not only as a political system, but as an organism that unites its nation, and viewed language as the most important tool that gave life to this organism. Ueda called the language in an inseparable relationship to the state as the ‘national language’ (Gokugo). Ueda professed that ‘The Japanese language is the spiritual blood of Japanese people, and the national body of Japan is maintained with this spiritual blood.’

- Lee, Yeonsuk, <Translation and the birth of modern national language>, ¹

The standard language ideology was a device widely used among early nation-states facing modernization. According to Lee’s research on Japanese linguists of the Meiji period, the function that standardization of language played in Japan’s nation-building process seems rather obvious. Regional dialects, the vernaculars of different classes, written and spoken tongues were subjected to standardization during this period, aside from

¹이 연숙. “번역과 근대 국어의 탄생”, 교수신문, 2 Apr 2001, <https://www.kyosu.net/news/articleView.html?idxno=555>.

the languages of the lands which were later to be colonized. Despite the drastic differences that lie in the modernization process in the colonizing and the colonized states, it is evident that standard language ideology was actively implemented for the formation of a general body and its naming necessary for efficient mass mobilization, irrespective of its purpose.

Forms of language control/subordination by the governing body vary from language extermination policies implemented in colonies to more subtle administrative exclusion in the form of state announcements made in the colonial “official” language. In his paper ‘Linguistic Isolation: A New Human Rights Violation Constituting Torture, and Cruel, Inhuman and Degrading Treatment’ (2013)², Peter Jan Honigsberg brings forward a case³ from the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), where Khudoyorov, a Tajik inmate in Russia, was only allowed to talk in Russian to his family who came to visit him so that the Russian guards could understand. The visit ended up in utter silence, as Khudoyorov’s Tajik family didn’t speak Russian.

1.1. Linguistic Variation and identity

However central, it is not only the executive orders that affect the bodies navigating social space. According to Rosina Lippi-Green,⁴ variation in language (i.e. accent, tone, lexicon) is a primary tool used in establishing social alliances, the performance of identity, indexing and re-establishing social power and structure between actors. Its social function lies in conveying information about the speaker who performs an identity that targets distinct points of variation to project a specific self-image, both consciously and un/sub/consciously. Her arguments are backed by vivid samples of American politicians and their deliberate framing of self-image and its presentation in their speech.

Markers of speech are composed of a variant mash-up of sets of vocabularies, tones and accents. Examples of political figures Lippi-Green brings forward methodically approach these markers, thereby successfully, or failing to identify with the social groups that they aim to address. While speaking “their’ tongue’ might bring tighter association between the speaker and the crowd, there also lies the risk of the efforts to align with specific speech communities backfiring.

U.S Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez’s speech at the Reverend Al Sharpton’s National Action Network in April 2019 and the following debate⁵ on the authenticity of her newly highlighted (1)Black, or (2)Bronx accent in addressing majorly black audiences in her hometown, New York, is an example of such. Despite the complex

²Honigsberg, Peter Jan. "Linguistic isolation: A new human rights violation constituting torture, and cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment." *Nw. UJ Int'l Hum. Rts.* 12 (2014): 22.

³ Khudoyorov v. Russia, App. No. 6847/02, Eur. Ct. H.R. ¶ 108 (2006).

⁴ Lippi-Green, Rosina. “ 9 Feb. 2013 University of Hawai ‘ Linguistic Authenticity and Ideology in performance of identity” *YouTube*, 9 Feb. 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtyrzGjEc3g>.

⁵ Mcwhorter, John. “It Wasn’t ‘Verbal Blackface.’ AOC Was Code-Switching. Her critics are misreading the linguistic reality of America’s big cities.” *The Atlantic*, 9 Apr. 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-code-switches-black-english/586723/>.

linguistic reality of hybrid subjects who often have acquired multiple vernaculars, as shown in the example of Ocasio-Cortez and her code-switching, a performance of an accent that is in discordance with the seemingly solid identity category that one belongs to can raise questions about their authenticity.

1.2. Multiculturalism and demand for assimilation

Multiculturalism changes all parties involved and assimilation happens in all directions. However, I want to note here the imbalance of the demand for assimilation with examples from <Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights>. In the book, Kenji Yoshino ⁶sheds light to the dark sides of assimilation with rich historical examples of the attempts made by the minority bodies to convert, pass, and cover their identity to fit the established norm of the society.

The legal scholar sharply points out how the current constitution of the United States divides a being from its performance and selectively protects the **existence** (invariable biological status) of minorities but not their **performance** (variable action, expression of culture). **Because the living performs**, such craft leaves minority bodies unprotected, and this evident risk of punishment further pressures them into silence and invisibility in regards to the performance of specific identity that is not aligned with that of the societal majority.

He cites various examples of performance related to expression of minority identity which has been made illegal and/or undermined in public and personal grounds, ranging from the 'don't ask don't tell' policy (1994-2011) regulating the self expression of lesbians, bisexuals, and gays serving in the US military, to his own anecdotes where the Asian American author learned to speak "Japlish" during his school years in Japan to avoid bullying for talking like a native speaker.

2. Examples of self presentation by female Asian artists

2.1. Nikki. S. Lee, "Projects" series (1997-2001)

Many artists coming from minority backgrounds have dealt with this silencing, yet soundly present request for assimilation to the major society in their own ways. Artist Nikki S Lee is an example who transformed her look in the process of immersing herself in myriad different cultural scenes. The South Korea-born artist goes through radical visual transformations as she adapts to her ever-changing environments. In her ongoing photography series titled "00 project" (1997-2001), Lee shows up as a hispanic, black, lesbian, elderly, Japanese in the US, a South Korean teenager and more. She approaches the target group of the project, informs them about the project, and then blends in. She wears her surroundings while navigating the space of (sub)cultured norms in multiple societies. The visual archive of her transformation is recorded in photographs of the scene with her inside, usually taken by a friend or a passerby.

The broad range of identities she could project in her work is not irrelevant to her race. As an Asian, Lee is an inbetween of two streaks of racist standards, namely anti-Blackness and white supremacy. Her indistinct racial position within the spectrum effectively expands the visual potency of her transformations. In her work, a non-offensive, harmless Asian woman's skin that doesn't belong to either end of the racial spectrum becomes a

⁶ Yoshino, Kenji. "Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights", *Penguin Random House LLC*, 2006.

medium that could be something, anything, everything, and nothing. The endless variations in the practice of 'becoming' portrayed in her series seems to reflect the crisis of 'self as a project' in the silent order of neoliberal capitalism demanding liquidity. Many responses produced at the time mainly focused on the trans-bordering aspect of her work, which later led to debate around cultural appropriation in the arts. In an interview conducted in 2013 in Korean language, the artist looked back at the time as a period of sadness, buoyancy, and void, along with the physical challenges she faced during her transformation process.



Fig. 1. Lee, Nikki. "The young Japanese Project (East Village)", 1997



Fig. 2. Lee, Nikki. "The punk project" (8), 1997



Fig. 3. Lee, Nikki. "The Hip hop project", 2001

2.2. Lee Bul, "Sorry for suffering: Do you think I'm a puppy on a picnic?" (1990)

While Nikki S Lee actively takes part in the masquerade and presents her success to the viewers and participants, thereby disclosing the fictitious nature of normality, artist Lee Bul takes the approach to flip the very strategy of masquerade by presenting herself as a grotesque, unidentifiable being in her work "Sorry for suffering: Do you think I am a puppy on a picnic?" (1990). The South Korean artist dresses up in a suit made out of soft objects that reminds one of cut-up body parts and magnified organs, where the interior seems to be flipped outwards. She starts her 12-day performance from the South Korean countryside and proceeds to the airport where she lands in metropolitan Tokyo to continue her walk. The path from rural South Korea, an ex-colony of Japanese empire to the public space of Tokyo itself is symbolic, but what draws my interest is in her stop at the airport, where the state control on its borders is at its height. There was Lee, passing the security checks to finally arrive at the aircraft which will soon fly above a water in endless territorial dispute, with her soft red monstrous suit.



Fig. 4. Lee, Bul. "Sorry for suffering: do you think I'm a puppy on a picnic?", 1990

3. "Good Mocking Bird" (2020)

The two artists' early practices demonstrate different strains of exit plans from present constraints. The former through mimicry and (self)mockery, and the latter through the creation of unprecedented self. My work, <Good Mocking Bird> follows both strategies adapted by Nikki S Lee and Lee Bul, although partially. The project consists of two parts: (1) a performance by talking bird dolls that appear at a zoom meeting, and (2) a book in 2 languages. As the viewer enters the space of the online performance, one is faced with two mass-produced bird dolls looking into the laptop camera, repeatedly apologizing for not speaking German in German, along with the pdf file of the book made available for download in the top right corner.



Fig. 5. Jang, Kyungrim. “Good Mocking Bird”, 2020

3.1. Performance “Good Mocking Bird”

<Good Mocking Bird> consists of multiple overlapping **contradictions**, and the layers can be dissected as followed.

- (A) The apologies for the speaker’s inability to speak in German (content) is generated in fluent German (container).
- (B) Diverging speech variations (content) are generated through an identical body (container). The voice coming out of two birds is the same, while the accents carrying the speech varies: (1) a Vorarlberg German accent and (2) a Standard German accent.
- (C) Apologies for materials intact to human living (content), including adequate knowledge on popular culture, rent, text, and face is generated by a mechanical voice (container)

I’m sorry, It’s not your fault.

I’m sorry I pay tax

- (D) Repeated apology (content X) and ironical mockery (content Y) are presented simultaneously within the same speech.

The resulting project is a mash-up of contradictions, where the container is unable to represent the contents due to an inherent irony. Contrary desires for societal acceptance necessary for survival and self preservation coexist within a single body of subordinated subjects, and artistic choice to layer contradictions has been made to present what truth is to a tongue split in the repeated practices of mimicry.

Another significant feature of the project lies in the **excessiveness of the style of its containers**. I aimed to evoke a feeling of unsettledness through the exaggerated politeness of the speech made by the soft, small dolls which do not seem capable of inflicting any harm. The outlook of the birds, along with the exaggerated politeness in the speech, works as a camouflage for the ironic mockery that briefly appears sandwiched between the repeated apologies playing on a loop. The same abundance can be detected in the font used in the cover of the Korean book that screams German, which might appear uncomfortable, and/or familiar to many.

Such excessive performance is a vehicle to embody the excess required for those not enough to be recognized. To hyper-normalize, and to be hyper friendly, and to be hyper approachable. The excess functions as a robe that hides the possibility underlying aggression, a revelation of which can endanger one's existential status. However, as appears in the feelings evoked by the font of the cover of the book, the normality imagined by the subject might be an outdated conception.

3.2. Book “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”

While the methodology adopted in the installation and the poetry book are identical in their aesthetics of contradiction and excessiveness, they are pointing at opposite directions.

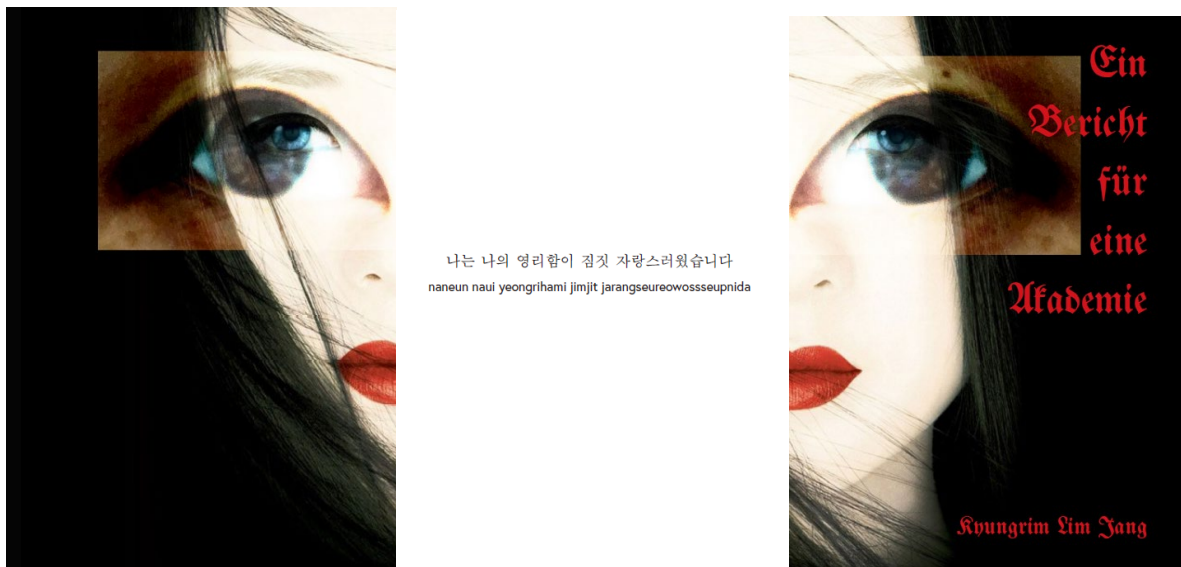


Fig. 6. Jang, Kyungrim. “Ein Bericht für eine Akademie”. pdf, 2020

The title of my book is borrowed from one⁷ of the short stories created by Franz Kafka, where an ape adapted to human civilization reports about his past as an animal to the prestigious gentlemen of the academy. The ape in Kafka's short story also appears in my book as a friend who 'I', the protagonist of the poem, attempts to visit. I wrote the poetry back in 2017 in Korean language, in my mother tongue.

The German-titled book bears content directed in the Korean language along with the phonetic transcription in Latin. The phonetic transcription is freely done without following the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) or any other official rules set for transcription, as the book attempts to reach popular audience without professional knowledge on standard transcription methodology. The title seems inviting to the German speaking audience of the presentation setting, but there is no detected attempt for a will to communicate with its readers within the pages of the book other than its cover. The reader of the book is then faced with three choices: to see the book, to flip through the pages, or to attempt to read. The reader's attempt to read would always end up in some sort of mimicry unless the reader has previously acquired knowledge on Korean Language.

4. Conclusion

While the contents of the speech in the recordings from the performance consist of apologies in a tongue foreign to me, the content of the book is in my native tongue. Presentation of the text of the book in its original language of direction is a deliberate statement for anti-translation, and the artistic choice has been made to be truthful to the content and its initial target audience.

Through the parallel presentation of (1) pre-translated German recoding made up of repetitive, impersonal apologies in the performance, and the (2) book of untranslated Korean poetry with a German cover, I aimed to create a space that is open for translation. I claim that the project is a work of performance, but the subject, the performer, is absent. I am nowhere to be found in the entire 'performance' of the two – part piece, "Good Mocking Bird". It is because I left already and am no longer here.

⁷ 카프카, 프란츠. 변신 시골의사. 전영애역. 서울: 민음사, 1998. 인쇄도서.

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<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/04/alexandria-ocasio-cortez-code-switches-black-english/586723/>.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xQXR0Au-ii4>.