

## **Special Submission: Literature Analysis**

**Encountering the Ghosts of Gwangju: Tragedy and Trauma in Ch'oe Yun's *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and Han Kang's *Human Acts***  
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## Encountering the Ghosts of Gwangju: Tragedy and Trauma in Ch'oe Yun's *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and Han Kang's *Human Acts*

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*When reality was darker than fiction, those who witnessed the Gwangju Democratic Uprising of May 1980 were left chasing specters and ghosts while attempting to put to words the trauma they experienced at the hand of a brutal military regime. Despite years of governmental repression, the ghosts of Gwangju began to resurface in the student protests of the 1980s, subsequent literature and continue to resurface to this day. Regardless of how much truth is revealed about the events of May 1980, the Gwangju Democratic Uprising still carries a haunting element of the incomprehensible, specters and traces that cannot be resolved. As such, Gwangju presents an almost impossible problem for writers and scholars alike: how can they confront the tragedy of Gwangju beyond pure commemoration or exploitation? In order to address this situation, authors Ch'oe Yun and Han Kang looked to specters -- haunting figures that exist in both the living and the dead victims of Gwangju -- in their stories *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts*, respectively. Both works of fiction, written decades apart, confront the tragedy of Gwangju and try to put language to trauma, and both evoke ghosts as the vessels through which trauma is inherited and lurks in the everyday. *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts* present a Derridean hauntology that implicates not only the authors, but the readers, in the grief of the Gwangju Uprising. This work seeks to understand the presence of ghosts in Ch'oe and Han's work, not just as representations of the dead of Gwangju, but as a historical burden that extends beyond characters into the language of grief and trauma that each novel employs. This paper will also use *There a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts* as lenses to understand how the legacy of Gwangju continues to haunt the Korean consciousness, compelling Gwangju*

*literature, though rare, to still be written in the twenty-first century.*

### Introduction:

If it – learning to live – remains to be done, it can happen only between life and death. Neither in life nor in death *alone*. What happens between two, and between all the “two’s” one likes, as such between life and death, can only *maintain* itself with some ghost, can only *talk with or about* some ghosts. So it would be necessary to learn spirits.... To learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company. Or the companionship.... To live otherwise and better. No, not better, but more justly.... And this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.<sup>1</sup>

If we are to live, to live better, we must learn from ghosts and specters, so argues Jaques Derrida in his seminal work, *Specters of Marx*. Put to question here is not *what a ghost is?* But *why* and *how* do ghosts and specters haunt the politics of the present and cultural memory. For the wrongs of history that resurface in the present, the specters of revolution, the ghosts of tragedy, appear and re-appear, always reminding us of not only our physical mortality but the ideas and tragedies that have not died and haunt the present. How then are we to address these ghosts? Do we attempt to speak to them, like Horatio to the King, demanding it to speak? Do we wait for the ghosts to speak to us? Or, in literature, can we speak for the specters as part of the work of mourning? When history demands that we actively forget, how do we keep the dead alive? To speak to, speak for, the ghosts, mourning by the people is necessary to conjure the ghosts and coexist.

These are only some of the questions raised by deconstructionist philosopher Jaques Derrida in his outline of hauntology or the study of the specters that exists between ontological concepts of history and their cultural legacy. Between every ontological concept and its opposite lies a specter that haunts and cannot be resolved. Nonetheless, it manifests in the present and persistently haunts like a ghost. When looking at history, there is no such thing as a single “event.” Instead, an event is born from something (always already existing), and the event itself continues to reproduce and multiply. This constant production produces dominant narratives and carries with it that

1 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx : the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvii-xviii.

which has been repressed. The key question for Derrida is not how to speak to the ontological concepts or define historical “events,” but rather how to address the persistent elements that remain unspoken (either by force or through the passage of time) between life and death of history and human action. In *Specters of Marx*, he explores how the ghosts and specters of Marxism exist in the present day. However, his outline of hauntology – of that which exists is history, haunts the present, but has yet to be spoken to -- creates a viable framework through which deconstruction of historical trauma is possible. Derridean hauntology seeks to identify ghosts of history and talk to them, not as means of justice, but as a way of living *better* in the present and future.

The challenges of adequately addressing history laid out in *Specters of Marx* raise critical questions when exploring cultural trauma and the legacy of tragedy, specifically when looking to South Korea. The twentieth century saw a series of tragedies compounded on one another, creating a society that is always running from ghosts and haunted by specters of the past and present. Due to years of authoritarian repression and the resulting cultural and collective trauma, ghosts and specters are everywhere in contemporary South Korea: in the fear of communism, the dark alleys of the *kijicheon*,<sup>2</sup> the landmines along the DMZ, and in the city center of Gwangju where hundreds were murdered and disappeared by paratroopers in May of 1980. These specters linger because they are unresolved and because they have yet to be fully spoken to. Speaking to and for specters is not an easy task because the very nature of a ghost is that it is not visible, neither fully living nor fully dead. Disguised in armor, much like the King in Hamlet, ghosts can be used to trick, scare, prevent that which is inevitable to re-occur: *ghosts can be silenced*. By hiding the specters – limiting the press, lying to the public – the language necessary to address them becomes more complex. Regardless, we must speak to them.

### **Ghosts and Specters in a Haunted Society**

The Gwangju Democratic Uprising began on May 18, 1980, traumatizing the citizens of Gwangju and leaving hundreds, potentially thousands, dead or missing by the end of the protests on May 25, 1980, and in the months that followed. The atrocities witnessed by the residents of Gwangju were so impactful that language failed to capture the severity of the military

2 Camp towns, or brothels near US Army bases. This idea is well portrayed in the 2012 documentary *Tour of Duty*.

repression of the city, with people referring to it only as the “Gwangju Incident” (gwangjusageon) for years following. We now know that what began as a coordinated student protest by students of Chonnam University against the Chun Doo-hwan regime quickly escalated into a city-wide, armed uprising after the Chun administration declared martial law on May 17, 1980. The city was closed off, with no one allowed to enter or exit aside from the military. Despite the lockdown, Gwangju citizens continued to protest, and potentially thousands of Gwangju citizens were indiscriminately killed at the hands of military paratroopers in response. Despite the unspeakable violence within Gwangju, the rest of the country remained largely unaware of the scale of the government’s response. The Chun government repressed news circulation out of Gwangju and instead crafted a narrative that the military responded to a communist threat in the region. Even the American allies were unable (or unwilling) to intervene during the seven-day confrontation and the months that followed. When the violence came to a stop on May 25, citizens of Gwangju were left in disbelief, still struggling to fully understand the violence they had witnessed at the hands of their government. As outlined by Sheena Choi in her work “Protesting Identity: Memories of the Kwangju Uprising and Effects on Identity Formation of Youths,” even for Gwangju citizens who did not directly experience violence at the hands of the state, the Gwangju incident left them with significant trauma. This trauma was further compounded by the inability of those outside Gwangju to believe the events even when witnesses tried to communicate the truth.<sup>3</sup>

The authoritarian repression of Chun Doo-hwan’s administration, as well as regionalism,<sup>4</sup> prevented the Gwangju Democratic Uprising from properly entering public discourse until the *minjung* student movements of the mid to late 1980s. The movements took on the Gwangju Uprising as what Lee Namhee identifies as the “original” sin that had to be atoned for through the revelation of the atrocities that took place.<sup>5</sup> Simultaneously,

3 Sheena Choi, “Protesting Identity: Memories of the Kwangju Uprising and Effects on Identity Formation of Youths,” *Educational Perspectives* 46 (2013): 9-19.

4 Since the Park Chung Hee administration (1961-1979) the southern province of Jeolla was largely excluded from state development and was presented as an agricultural center of developing South Korea. However, this exclusion led to isolation of the Jeolla people from the larger development project and only heightened regional divides between Jeolla and other provinces.

5 Namhee Lee, *The Making of Minjung: Democracy and the Politics of Representation*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 54.

Korean literature has also made attempts to confront the tragedy of Gwangju when reality was darker than fiction, those who witnessed the uprising used language, specifically literature, to commemorate, enlighten and grapple with the events that took place in Gwangju from May 18 to May 25.

Ch'oe Yun was one of the first authors to attempt to capture trauma, grief, and guilt in her short story *There, a Petal Silently Falls* (1988/1992). The short story follows nameless narrators on the quest for a "girl [they] had never seen" desperately searching for her brother following the events of the Gwangju uprising.<sup>6</sup> Writing decades later in 2011, Han Kang also undertook the ambitious project of capturing the auxiliary trauma of the Gwangju uprising through her multi-narrative, time-skipping novel *Human Acts*. Han's novel, as well, focuses on the lingering presence of the ghost of Dong-ho, a volunteer who was killed by soldiers. His death haunts Gwangju survivor Eun-soo five years later as she attempts to understand the forced normalcy of those around her and contemplates if violence is human nature. Both works of fiction, written decades apart, confront the tragedy of Gwangju and try to put language to trauma, both evoking ghosts as the vessels through which trauma is inherited and lurks in the everyday.

Ch'oe's short story was groundbreaking in its subject matter, arising at a time when realism and autobiographical fiction made up most of the published literature. Furthermore, the 1980s were often regarded as a lackluster dark period in Korean literature. Bae Ha-eun argues that this depression was not due to a lack of literary merit coming out of the age, but instead that the realities of the 1980s – particularly in the wake of the Gwangju Uprising – were too dark to be captured in the conventional narrative structures of the time. By exploring the work of Ch'oe Yun alongside Im Cheol-woo, Bae asserts that their fiction was the first to break with the physical reality of Gwangju into a new level of signification and commemoration.<sup>7</sup> Choi Young-ja echoes Bae's readings of Ch'oe's work, adding an ethical implication of the reader in *A Petal Silently Falls*, where the "us" of the second person narrative becomes the collective conscious of the readers, directly

6 Ch'oe Yun, *There, a Petal Silently Fall*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 78.

7 Ha-eun Bae, "Jaehyeon neomeoeui jeungeon : 1980nyeondae imcheoru, choeyun soseoreui 5.18 jeungeon-jaehyeon munjee gwanhayeo," *Sangheohakbo*, 2017, 491-541.

living in the wake of Gwangju, chasing ghosts that we too have never met.<sup>8</sup>

Han Kang's work has received slightly more critical attention in recent years. However, most scholarship regarding *Human Acts* leans towards the limits of translation in portraying the trauma of Kang's novels. Daniel Y. Kim's *Translations and Ghostings of History* falls into this camp of research, but he expands beyond the limits of Korean to English translation and instead explores how Han Kang's experiences of the Gwangju uprising as a child echo in her larger body of work.<sup>9</sup> His essay pays particular attention to the final chapters of *Human Acts* in which Eun-soo confronts the ghost of Dong-ho, and he understands this as an expression of the incomprehensible grief and the ghosts of Gwangju that haunt not only the characters but the author herself. Hwang Jeong-ah approaches *Human Acts* from the angle of historical testimony, with the multiple narratives of Han's novel existing as a way of working through the trauma of the massacre.

While both novels deal with the same historical incident and independently have a body of scholarship around them, the two have yet to be considered products of the same line of historical trauma that began in the 1980s and persists to the modern day. With years and investigations between Ch'oe and Han's work, why is the specter of Gwangju still so remarkably present in each text? To properly answer this question, this article will employ Jaques Derrida's concept of *hauntology*. More specifically, it will assert that Gwangju literature "attends to a ghost" that presents itself as a "wholly irrecoverable intrusion in our world, which is not comprehensible within our available intellectual frameworks, but whose otherness we are responsible for preserving."<sup>10</sup> Derrida is not only addressing physical ghosts and phantoms but the burden of language and history that infuse themselves into the text, carrying the weight of history as a means of grieving and preserving historical memory. For Derrida, ghosts can be understood as what history actively tries to repress, and specters become

8 Youngja Choi, *Gwangjumjunghangjaeng soseore natanan yullijeok jucheroseoeui munjeeuisikgwa daean mosaek yeongu -imcheoru bomnal gwa choeyuneui jeogi sorieopsi han jeom kkochipi jigo reul jungsimeuro*, (Seoul: Inmunsahoe, 2019), 545-558.

9 Kim, Daniel Y. 2020 Spring; 51(2). "Translations and Ghostings of History: The Novels of Han Kang." *New Literary History: A Journal of Theory and Interpretation* 375-399.

10 Davis, Colin. July 2005. "Hauntology, spectres and phantoms." *French Studies, Volume 59, Issue 3* 373-379.

the manifestation of that repression. Both *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts* are excellent examples of this kind of historical haunting that implicates the authors and the readers, in the grief of the Gwangju Uprising

For many scholars, the ghosts of Gwangju can be addressed through shamanism. Shamanism also confronts suffering and pain (*sinbyeong*) through negotiating with the spirits and exorcism (*hanpuri*). While there are valid connections to shamanism that can be drawn to the examined texts, Derrida's framework of hauntology is more closely related to the political ghosts and repression. Moving away from shamanistic understandings of ghosts can make room for the specters of Gwangju to be analyzed more accurately in their socio-political context in hopes of providing novel insights and perspectives. This will aid the understanding of the presence of ghosts in Ch'oe and Han's work, not just as representations of the dead of Gwangju, but as a historical burden that extends beyond characters into the language of grief and trauma that each novel employs. In the two novels to be examined, specters manifest in three main emotions: guilt, anger, and injustice. By looking at the role of these specters of Gwangju, we can better see how the legacy of Gwangju continues to haunt the Korean consciousness as a means of understanding why Gwangju literature, though rare, is still being written.

### **Ch'oe Yun's, *There, a Petal Silently Falls***

Ch'oe Yun's *There, a Petal Silently Falls* uses three non-linear narratives to show the various traumas and reactions in the days following the Gwangju Uprising. Understanding that "violence interrupts time, disarticulates it, dislodges it, and displaces it out of its natural lodging," the unclear timeline of *There, a Petal Silently Falls* is properly "out of joint."<sup>11</sup> Violent acts, like those experienced in Gwangju in 1980, create a rupture between the time of the event and lived experience— producing a quest for understanding that lies neither in the past nor the present. This is exactly the case for the characters within *There, a Petal Silently Falls*— each seeking their form of understanding or attempting to right the wrongs of May 1980, without fully understanding the magnitude of the incident. Time and place become secondary to the power of the trauma. Therefore, Ch'oe's narrative has no choice but to be disjointed as it seeks to piece together the fragmented experiences of multiple characters.

Throughout the story, the word "Gwangju" is never mentioned. Instead, the location of the tragedy must be pieced together, bit by bit. Writing

11 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 37



in the late 1980s, the truth of the Gwangju Uprising was being uncovered and largely still unknown to the public. Ch'oe chose this narrative style to convey the confusion and the trauma of people from different walks of life. Each character in Ch'oe's short story is chasing a specter of something, and each character is also running from the ghosts of Gwangju – both the Derridean ghosts of memory as well as specters of haunting that manifest in real ghosts. The main narrator, a young girl, witnessed the massacre firsthand and has dissociated from her own body. The second narrator, a group of unnamed students, chases the girl as an act of duty to her dead brother. The final narrator is a working-class man who has no knowledge of what happened in Gwangju but takes the girl in and tries to understand her ghostly presence.

Suddenly, a voice came from that mouth. At first it was soft, but then, as that underground thump grew steadily louder, it changed into a cry. That gaping mouth began to say things it shouldn't have: "I'm going to get rid of that black curtain for you. You said it's been covering your head – since when? Liar! Look at me now! Go ahead, attack me! I'm going to open up that skull of yours and pull out the curtain. You want me to tell you what happened? No? Come on, attack me! Look me in the eye, put those shameless lips to work, tell me all about that awful scene!"<sup>12</sup>

Approaching the climax of Ch'oe Yun's *There, a Petal Silently Falls*, the unnamed girl narrator attacks her own "monstrous" reflection in the window of a train. Her [unrecognized] reflection's crime is provoking her to speak about what she saw on a day in May in "that city to the South." Throughout the novel, the unnamed girl's journey has only one goal: to find the body of her brother and finally confess that their mother is dead, and she watched it happen. Until that moment, she could not speak. Even as those around her take her in, force alcohol down her throat, rape her, beat her, and try to help her, she remains mute. Those around her do not know what happened in that city to the south yet. They only can guess that she came from there given her tattered appearance and dead eyes – the same expression they have seen on countless others who managed to escape.

The girl, in many ways, is a walking specter, completely dissociated from reality, her eyes filled with "sand" and a black curtain that covers her

12 Ch'oe, *There, a Petal Silently Falls*, 52

thoughts and prevents her from remembering, from speaking. The lines between life and death blur in her narration: she knows her mother and brother are dead, she somewhat registers that she is alive, and yet she insists on finding them, speaking to them. In her mourning, she is attempting to both “conjure” and “exorcise” the “malignant” or “evil doing” specter that haunts her, and her method of exorcism is to speak.<sup>13</sup> When the curtain is finally lifted, her subconscious forces her to look, forces the specters of that day to the forefront:

And then I heard it, a sound like someone walking alone in the dead of night. It became the sound of someone running after us... some caught Mama from behind, and faster than a sound something ripped into her chest. My mother's chest. It happened so quickly. *That's why you have to open your eyes wide and look! Look at that one instant!* When Mama's face was thrown back, when she turned to face me, Mama with holes in her, her mouth open, only the whites of her eyes showing. And I... *That's it, call it all up, take your time, every last detail, until your bones dissolve in grief.*<sup>14</sup>

The final utterance, “Until your bones dissolve in grief,” captures the magnitude of the trauma the narrator experienced: a trauma so strong it consumed her physical body and silenced her. Yet, through Ch’oe’s narrative, she is forced to speak as it is the only way grief can be expelled. For Derrida, this is a “conjuration,” or an “incantation destined to evoke, to bring forth the voice,” but stops short of “[causing] something to happen,” because her life ends before she can speak.<sup>15</sup> Tragically, like many who witnessed the events of Gwangju, her grief dies with her, leaving those who pursue her as unaware as they were at the beginning of the story. For them, she becomes a specter of a tragedy they cannot fully comprehend.

Grappling with the events of Gwangju were also Korean citizens outside of Gwangju that were trying to understand the events that took place under a government that did everything in its power to keep it a secret. In another point of view, a group of university students pursues the girl. They have never met her, but they knew her brother that was killed in Seoul in the months before the event in the city to the south. They chase

13 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 59.

14 Ch’oe, *There, a Petal Silently Falls*, 70.

15 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 50.

her because they are trying to “fill the void [her brother] had left” because they have heard something happened in that city to the south, and another senseless death would be too much to bear.<sup>16</sup> They know they are no longer chasing a full human, but a “soul,” a specter of tragedy and loss. By forcing themselves to encounter it, they might be able to make amends.

We, her brother’s classmates, had set out in search of her, and now that we were wide awake we spent the hours remaining till dawn wondering exactly why we had launched this search. To comfort our lost friend with the knowledge that we had found her? To fulfill our sense of obligation to do something after what had happened that day in that city to the South? Or because we couldn’t live with ourselves if we did nothing?... Were we motivated by a masochistic desire to find that girl a corporeal vestige of that horrible day?... or were we trying simply to live on in spite of the cancerous nightmares we carried inside us?<sup>17</sup>

In this narrative, specters appear as a different kind of trauma: guilt. The students who did not witness the events in Gwangju but did witness the death of their friend are left to wonder why they are alive and why those around them keep dying. As [implied] student activists, the collective guilt associated with the Gwangju uprising came to be known as “the original sin” of the democratization movement. Their narrative captures their negotiation of why it is important to understand what took place. To them, the girl may be a “corporeal vestige of that horrible day,” a specter they can approach and speak to alleviate the “cancerous nightmares” that haunt them. The guilt they feel compels them to chase her, no matter how fruitless their pursuit may be.

Ch’oe’s non-linear and multi-perspective narrative uncovers the multiple specters of Gwangju, allowing some of them to be spoken to, but forcing others into permanent silence. Writing in the late 1980’s when much of what happened in Gwangju was still largely unknown, Ch’oe’s intentionally vague narrative captures the confusion of the survivors trying to make sense of tragedy. Gwangju itself is the Derridean ghost that political leader try to repress within this narrative. The girl, the lone survivor, then manifests as a specter to those around her. She cannot speak or be fully understood, yet her haunting presence unnerves those she encounters, pulling out their best and worst instincts in trying to take care of her. Some react to the specter

16 Ch’oe, *There, a Petal Silently Falls*, 74.

17 *Ibid.*, 76.

girl with violence (rape, beatings), while others band together to protect her. Regardless of their reaction to the girl, her spectrality pulls out the effects of grief, guilt, and anger that plagued society in the aftermath of Gwangju.

### Han Kang's, *Human Acts*

The dead can often be more powerful than the living.<sup>18</sup>

Over twenty years after Ch'oe's *There, a Petal Falls*, Gwangju native Han Kang published her novel, *Human Acts*. With more distance from the events of May 1980, Han also employs a non-linear, multi-narrative style to show how the specters of Gwangju continue to haunt even into the present. In particular, Han uses the spirit of a boy named Dong-ho to express the way different people spoke to his ghost under the pressure of political repression and censorship. Navigating between the past and present, multiple friends and acquaintances of Dong-ho bring to light the reach of the trauma that inhabits both the living and the dead, giving each narrative space to address the spirit of Dong-ho and grieve his loss in the place of hundreds of others who died in May 1980. Beyond the ghost of Dong-ho, Han takes spectrality a step further than Ch'oe by giving a voice to the dead body of Dong-ho's best friend Jeong-dae in the second chapter of the book, *The Boy's Friend, 1980*. In so doing, Han addresses the disbelief of the victims, the immense grief they feel knowing others have also died, and ultimately the rage that compels their souls to linger, wondering why they had to die.

Jeong-dae's chapter begins as his body is thrown into a cross-shaped pile in a field from a truck. Aware of his death, Jeong-dae remarks, "with my head tipped backwards, the shade of the wood turned my face into a pallid ghost of itself, eyes closed and mouth hanging open."<sup>19</sup> Though he is dead - "we were bodies, dead bodies, and in that sense there was nothing to choose between us"<sup>20</sup>- his soul moves like a living body, climbing to the top of the pile of bodies to observe the faces and souls of the dead. Whereas the girl in *There, a Petal Silently Falls* was understood as a "corporeal vestige," Jeong-dae himself (and those around him) as "an incorporeal something," that confuses him because "no one had ever taught [him] how to address a

18 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 60.

19 Han, Kang. 2016. *Human Acts*. London: Portobello Books, 52.

20 *Ibid.*, 57.

person's soul."<sup>21</sup> Souls will be central to Jeong-dae's chapter, as he comes to understand the power of a soul and the impact of death, the way he went from a human with dreams to a body in a pile of "festering flesh now fused into a single mass, like the rotting carcass of some many-legged monster."<sup>22</sup>

I wasn't Jeong-dae anymore... I wasn't Park Jeong-dae, whose ideas of love and fear were both bound up in the figure of his sister. A strange violence welled up within me, not spurred by the fact of my death, but simply because of the thoughts that wouldn't stop tearing through me, the things I needed to know. Who killed me, who killed my sister, and why.<sup>23</sup>

As bodies are added to the pile day by day, Jeong-dae becomes increasingly frustrated with the circumstances of his death. He contemplates how things went from "a vast mass of humanity... making a show of solidarity," while marching in the city center into "faces [that] were canceled out, expunged by white paint."<sup>24</sup> He recalls the horror on Dong-ho's face when he realized the military was firing on their citizens: "you muttered to yourself in blank incomprehension, *our soldiers are shooting. They're shooting at us.*"<sup>25</sup> His thoughts evoke the dehumanization of the protestors whose deaths were kept secret and the horrifying moment those protestors realized exactly how little they meant to their government. The shock of paratroopers firing so indiscriminately at civilians traumatized those who witnessed it – it was a thought so incomprehensible that those outside Gwangju refused to believe it even when survivors spoke out in the early days following the massacre. Similarly, for Jeong-dae, his soul demands to know why he died -- so much so that he vows to haunt those who killed him:

I want to see their faces, to hover above their sleeping eyelids like a guttering flame, to slip inside their dreams, spend the nights flaring in through their forehead, their eyelids. Until their nightmares are filled with my eyes, my eyes

21 Ibid., 52.

22 Ibid., 57.

23 Ibid., 55.

24 Ibid., 62-63.

25 Ibid., 63.

as the blood drains out. Until they hear my voice asking, demanding, why.<sup>26</sup>

Jeong-dae's chapter introduces a new kind of specter of Gwangju: the haunting of injustice. For Derrida, injustice can prompt acts of retaliation in the quest for justice, "to *do justice* or to *render justice* to the other on behalf of the other."<sup>27</sup> Senseless deaths like his and Dong-ho's never had the chance to be acknowledged – his body decomposes in a field before it is set on fire, erasing him forever. By speaking for Jong-dae's soul, Han presents an "imprecation" or curse against those who caused suffering. An imprecation "does not theorize, it is not content to say how things are, it cries out the truth, it promises, it provokes."<sup>28</sup> Of course, the irony is that Jong-dae is already dead and cannot act on his imprecation short of haunting those who murdered him: "*go to those who killed you, then. But where are they?*"<sup>29</sup> The helplessness Jong-dae's soul experiences produces an "affective baggage" for the reader, who is now the carrier of Jong-dae's promise and implicated in the injustice of his death.<sup>30</sup>

This affective baggage carries through in the novel as specters of Gwangju continue to haunt the present timeline. Jong-dae and his sister briefly return to the story in the chapter *The Factory Girl, 2002*. Here, Han once again plays with time and narrative, switching between the perspectives of "now," "you remember," and "uprising" as the narrator is forced to confront her memories of the Gwangju Uprising, her time working in a factory, and the torture she endured at the hands of the military. As she sits down to write, she contemplates, "Testimony, Meaning. Memory. For the Future."<sup>31</sup> She is reluctant to confront the ghosts of her past, but the specters of those she knew keep invading her memory. "Yoon has asked you to remember. To 'face up to those memories,' 'bear witness to them.' But how can such a thing be possible?"<sup>32</sup>

By "speaking up" and "bearing witness," the narrator must engage in

26 Ibid., 61.

27 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 32.

28 Ibid., 52.

29 Han, *Human Acts*, 66.

30 Song, Jesook. 2016. *Living on Your Own: Single Women, Rental Housing, and Post-Revolutionary Affect in Contemporary South Korea*. New York: SUNY Press, 79.

31 Han, *Human Acts*, 173.

32 Ibid., 174.

precisely the conjuring Derrida spoke to in *Specters of Marx*: “to bear witness would be to bear witness to what we are insofar as what we inherit.”<sup>33</sup> Derrida asserted that “What seems almost impossible is to speak... to the specter, to speak with it, therefore especially *to make or to let a spirit speak*.”<sup>34</sup> He acknowledges that it is easy to deny the existence of ghosts, that it is only natural to push them away and not consider them with any seriousness. But, in challenging ourselves to conjure them, to face the specter head-on and make it *speak*, we can understand the nature of their haunting. For the narrator and her experiences in Gwangju, she has spent years unsuccessfully running from her trauma and the specters of her past. Even claiming at one point that she returned to Gwangju “to die” because she was so exhausted. The weight of her trauma cannot easily be put to words, nor can the specters of her past – the ghosts that remain in Gwangju – be easily put into language. Much like the girl in *There, a Petal Silently Falls*, she must first talk to herself and acknowledge the ghosts that follow her before she can speak to others.

Only occasionally, just now and then, you wander... and Dong-ho’s profile flits into your mind, mightn’t the thing flickering in front of your eyes be what they calla soul? In the early hours of the morning, when dreams you can’t remember have left your cheeks wet and the contours off that face jolt into an abrupt clarity, mightn’t that wavering be a soul’s emergence?<sup>35</sup>

In *Human Acts*, ghosts and specters are not limited to physical presences or absences but memory itself. This memory exists in the individual, as well as the collective. As Derrida asserted, “Marx has ghosts and we have ours, but memories no longer recognize such borders; by definition they pass through walls, these *revenants*, day and night, they trick consciousness and skip generations.”<sup>36</sup> Memories and ghosts are intimately linked. If we are to “bear witness” to them, we must also understand how they are inherited and perpetuated by a society that wants us to forget. The narrator wants to forget, and she assumes those around her already have. Society seems to have moved on, but the violence and trauma linger under the surface in specters in her memory. Her growth comes in learning that those around her also carry

33 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 68.

34 *Ibid.*, 11.

35 Han, *Human Acts*, 182.

36 Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 36.

the same specters, and each person is trying to find a way to speak to them.

*Human Acts* and its multiple narratives and timelines are Han Kang's way of bearing witness to the ghosts of Gwangju. Having grown up in Gwangju herself, she too admits to being haunted by specters of the trauma. So, she creates narratives that allow the ghosts to speak and give space for characters to address the specters directly. For the characters, talking to ghosts does not mean the trauma goes away, but it does allow for the dead to be mourned and not forgotten. Above all, the novel instills a responsibility in the reader to confront the ghosts of Gwangju and not let the past disappear as so many did in May of 1980. *Human Acts* is a bold work, especially when understood in the context of hauntology.

### **Conclusion: The Politics of Mourning and Memory**

When comparing *There, A Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts*, the changing nature of spectrality and ghosts surrounding the Gwangju Uprising become more apparent. Written in the same decade as the Gwangju Democratic Uprising, Ch'oe's *There, a Petal Silently Falls* used spectrality and ghosts to try and make sense of the event that was still largely unclear to the public. Her characters express confusion and violence when confronted by the specter of the girl. Some characters, the young university students, choose to pursue her to work through their guilt. Her spectrality, and the ghosts of the incident, remain mysteries and the truth of the event is never spoken in the novel, much the way the name "Gwangju" is never once written. *Human Acts*, written three decades later, no longer works to make sense of the events that happened in Gwangju in May 1981. Instead, it uses spectrality and ghosts to show how the events of the uprising linger in the subconscious and haunt an entire generation. Derrida would call this the inherited spectrality of an injustice. Han's writing is an act of "bearing witness" and speaking for and to the specters of Gwangju so that they will not be forgotten by a society that wants them to remain ghosts of the past.

Both these works offer significant contributions to understanding the impact the Gwangju Uprising had on South Koreans – not only those who witnessed it but society as a whole. The confusion following the uprising led to mass disbelief – few could comprehend how the government could fire on its citizens. The truth of the incident was buried for years and only brought back into public consciousness through the tireless effort of Gwangju survivors and student movements who refused to let it be forgotten. The sacrifices of Gwangju



citizens inspired the actions of student and democratization movements in the late 1980s. Still, with successful democratization, the truth of Gwangju was once again pushed to the sidelines. Literature acts as a way of not only confronting the specters of Gwangju but allowing them to speak in contemporary society.

For Derrida, “this being-with specters would also be, not only but also, a *politics* of memory, of inheritance, and of generations.”<sup>37</sup> How society chooses to address or speak to the ghosts of its history will determine how the society can cope with the trauma of the past. Specters of Gwangju exists for “others who are not present... in the name of justice.”<sup>38</sup> Korean literature can confront them and speak for them as a way of acknowledging the injustices of the past, “of justice where it is not yet, not yet *there*, where it is no longer.”<sup>39</sup> In this way, the works of Ch’oe and Han take on some of the responsibility Koreans have to history. By introducing the specters of Gwangju to the reader, they also bestow some of that responsibility upon them. Exposing the injustices of history through specters can affectively speak to their justice in the present. Therefore, we must engage with specters – with death – to “live better.”

The ghosts of Gwangju do not only reside in fiction, though literature has proven to be an effective medium to address them. Beyond allowing ghosts to speak, works like *There, a Petal Silently Falls* and *Human Acts* force the specters of trauma and mourning into real public discourse. So, then the question becomes, why is it still necessary to speak to these ghosts forty years after the massacre? If South Korea now operates under a third-wave liberal democracy, what is the value in perpetuating the grief of the past? The answer is both simple and complex: the ghosts of Gwangju continue to be evoked because the issue of Gwangju is still not settled – though many in power would like it to be. Beyond literature, Gwangju is frequently appropriated by politicians who connect their platforms to the legacy of 5.18. This is done in some respects to appeal to the collective trauma of the incident and underhandedly bring the issue to a close. If Gwangju can enter the public discourse as *history* and not a legacy that continues to haunt, then the injustices can forever be unaddressed. Time, as well, will remain out of joint with the injustices of the past becoming only history but never fully addressed. So long as Chun Doo Hwan continues to deny the atrocities, and the city of Gwangju seeks to commemorate the massacre and prove it happened, the ghosts of

37 Ibid., xviii.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

Gwangju will not be able to rest. Therefore, literature and the works of Ch'oe Yun, Han Kang, and their contemporaries force us to speak to those ghosts.