

*A Parting Ways While Being With. Critical Investigations and
Acts of Assembling in Jane Jin Kaisen's Practice*

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One of the scenes¹ from Jane Jin Kaisen's recent filmic work *Community of Parting* (2019) holds a certain cathartic, that is a certain violent, yet releasing quality. It is the scene in which shaman Koh Sunahn from the Korean island Jeju performs a ritual, the *neokdurim* (passage), recalling Kaisen's lost soul and expelling the so-called lesser evil spirits (or soldier spirits) haunting Kaisen's nightmares and daydreams.²

*Go away!
Shoo!
Fly away!
As I see
Frequently intruded upon
What intruded?
All the young people
All the elderly people
All the children
While moving around in foreign countries
To Korea, to Japan
Moving around
Fine face
Kind heart
Please, separate and
disentangle from her
Please, do not appear in her nightmares
Please, do not appear in her daydreams
As you wake up dreaming
The lesser soldier spirits
will be driven away!*³

1. The part of the ritual which I refer to here is displayed in *Community of Parting* (00:56:39-00:58:35).

2. The shamanic rituals appearing in the film are described further in the conversation between Kim Seognae and Jane Jin Kaisen in this publication.

3. Shaman Koh Sunahn in *Community of Parting* (00:56:17-00:58:40).

As part of the exorcism, the shaman takes a knife and presses it into Kaisen's hands, lips and temple, stabs her. At other points she covers Kaisen's head with white cloth, wafting pieces of *gime* (the shamanic ritual paper, referred to as the curtain of the gods), over her head, chanting to the spirits, waving at them, pushing them away. The scene concludes with shaman Koh Sunahn filling her mouth with a liquid that she forcefully spits onto Kaisen, who has remained seated throughout the ritual, her eyes closed.

The cathartic quality of the scene comes from the way in which it intensifies and releases, in the same movement, tensions accumulated over generations. Kaisen participates in the shamanic ritual performed by Koh Sunahn, who was the pupil of Kaisen's grandfather. By establishing communication between times, the shamanic ritual takes up a recurrent focus in Kaisen's works; the entangled relations between past events and how they have been experienced, and the present (which includes a presence), inhabited by people who all share this past, however relate to it in different ways.

The refrain of Bari

The sounds of the ritual drum and gong reverberate as the recording of the ritual shifts to that of the ocean and the voice-over of Kaisen, recounting and reflecting on the mythological figure of *Bari*, or *Bari Kongju*, the abandoned princess.⁴ The myth and figure of Bari is at the very center of *Community of Parting* and serves as a narrative framework and as a metaphor in several ways..

*There is a story that has endured division
yet is as old as Division itself.
It is the shamanic myth
of the Abandoned Princess Bari
who was exiled at birth for being born a girl.*⁵

4. See for instance the Encyclopedia of Korean Folk Culture, <http://folkency.nfm.go.kr/en/topic/detail/5353>

5. Jane Jin Kaisen in *Community of Parting* (00:00:20-00:00:34).

6. As explained in for instance HyeYoung Cho, "Border as Space, Diaspora as Community: Folded Body and Polyphonic Voice of the Bari-Film," in *History has Failed Us, but No Matter*, ed. Hyunjin Kim, The Korean Pavilion – 58th International Art Exhibition, Milan: Mousse Publishing, 2019, 56.
7. Cp. Kim Seognae in this publication.

8. Cecilia Widenheim and Jane Jin Kaisen refer to the concept developed by conceptual artist Mary Kelly. Kaisen describes "the discursive site" as: "a set of questions or concerns that informs an artistic practice and which it responds to. This can be an engagement with a particular artistic tradition, but an event, a political moment, or a community can also be formative as a discursive site." Kaisen, as cited in "A conversation between Cecilia Widenheim and Jane Jin Kaisen," in *Dissident Translations*, ed. Jane Jin Kaisen, Aarhus: Århus Kunstbygning, 2011, n.p.

It is the story of a daughter, who was initially given away – abandoned – but who ended up rescuing those parents that gave her up by transgressing the limit between the living and dead, and turning herself into a liminal being. The exclusion from her birth status, her *social death*, is what gives her the potential to redeem illnesses and sorrows. Therefore, the myth of Bari is also the founding myth of shamanism. Traditionally a story of filial piety, the story has recently been reinterpreted by poet Kim Hyesoon, who reads Bari's refusal to inherit half her father's kingdom as her resistance against existing systems and her choice to stay in the status of the in-between.⁶ In *Community of Parting*, this is expanded to an engagement with the geopolitical issues relating to Korea's division and ideological conflicts. Through the perspective of the diasporic and marginalized positions voiced in the film, it questions the very legitimacy of border-drawing and the operations of inclusion and exclusion this entails.

Just as the voice-overs in the film return to reflections upon Bari in a steady rhythm or refrain, the figure of Bari is a recurrent focus of the essays included in this publication, with slight variations and emphases in a way mirroring how orally transmitted narratives vary across iterations and from place to place. The name of Bari in this context refers to a metaphysics,⁷ a metaphor for the abandoned or marginalized women throughout Korea's modern history, the shamanic practices as well as the artistic practice of Kaisen, and the work itself.

Through Bari, Kaisen takes the opportunity to pose those questions anew, which she has repeatedly addressed in her practice: how to respond to past operations of suppression, and exclusion – of abandonment – how and where to direct the feelings of resentment, anger, or frustration, and how to establish communities that may resist ideological conflicts and polarities.

Community of Parting is an extension and continuation of Kaisen's decade-long investigation and development of a certain "discursive site."⁸ It therefore makes sense to view the works as contexts to each other, as elaborations and associations. Thus, neither the retrospective exhibition at Kunsthall Charlottenborg nor this publication presents a chronological overview of Kaisen's practice, but rather makes a spiraling movement, developing on motifs, themes, and artistic strategies – material-aesthetic as well as infrastructural,

or communicative – that appear in and across the works.

For instance, the figure of *Bari Kongju*, the abandoned princess from *Community of Parting*, is mirrored in another princess: the *Yang-gongju*, “the Western princess”⁹ – a derogative label for Korean women having sexual relationships with Americans,¹⁰ appearing in the work *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* (2010). And Kaisen’s critical practice of meticulously interrogating colonial, post-colonial (modern), and contemporary Korean history (formed through military and ideological conflicts as well as economic and cultural transactions) is juxtaposed with the poetics of the filmic works, and the metaphysical-metaphorical practices of shamans in a way that weaves together historical time with mythological time.

Memories of migration and migratory memories¹¹

At the heart of Kaisen’s artistic practice lies the attempt to discover those historical relations that have formed the present of those living as bodily presences caught between different cultures, asking which history, but also what stories and memories, should or can be seen to inform the present and future. Taking different historical events as her points of departure, Kaisen in several of her artworks engages in negotiating politics of identity¹² and memory in issues of adoption, colonization, migration, and community building. Through installations and filmic montages, Kaisen’s works combine archival documents and footage, oral testimonies, re-enactments and recordings of present day societies, shamanic practices as well as the recounting of mythological narratives in negotiating the means and possibilities of representation in technical as well as sociocultural and political terms.

In *Community of Parting*, a narrative is constructed that connects Korean diasporas in Japan, Kazakhstan, Europe, and the US, as well as North Korean defectors living in South Korea and the narratives of Korean female shamans in a reflection upon abandonment and the losses, but also potentials which the abandoned share. And the work becomes an example of the objective that persists across Kaisen’s practice: to find connections between fragments of the past, which can illuminate, even if they do not explain, the collective traumas that haunt the Korean population and diasporas after many years of conflict.

Throughout her practice, Kaisen has continuously engaged in research into instances of systematic suppression and marginalization of certain demographic groups, for instance adoptees within Danish/European or American contexts, and dissidents within South or North Korean contexts, directing attention and lending a voice to these often neglected perspectives and lives.

But her works simultaneously express a negotiation and questioning of what it means to be and to belong. By focusing on how distinct operations of exclusion and discrimination have been distributed according to specific and persistent, but also contingent, constitutional forms and cultural prejudices, Kaisen’s works examine how identities and subject positions may be complicated by shifts in perspective.

Certain events or sites continually occur in Kaisen’s works, for instance the history and legacies of the political tensions between the South Korean government and the provincial council of the Jeju

9. For the discourse on women in Korean military prostitution see for instance Tobias Hübinette, “The Nation is a Woman: The Korean Nation Embodied as an Overseas Adopted Korean Woman in Chang Kil-su’s Susanne Brink’s *Arirang*,” *Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context*, no. 11 (August 2005). <http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue11/hubinette.html> (accessed 18 June 2020).

10. Grace M. Cho, *Haunting the Korean Diaspora. Shame, Secrecy, and the Forgotten War*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

11. Some of the observations presented here are taken from Anne Kolbæk Iversen, “3. Distributed autobiographies and migratory memories,” from the dissertation *Forms and Formations of Memory. Artistic negotiations of (trans)individuations in light of contemporary memory conditions*, Aarhus University, 2019, 55-74.

12. I prefer to use the term politics of identity as an alternative to the widely used and often contested identity politics to emphasize that to identify someone as something (who should be politically represented and recognized) is and will always be political.

Province, epitomized in the Jeju April Third Uprising and Massacre 1948-49, and the marginalization of women as reflected in the legacy of the “comfort women” and in the case of transnational adoption.

Jane Jin Kaisen’s birth family stems from Jeju, and her paternal grandfather was imprisoned during the Jeju April Third Massacre for trying to prevent the authorities’ onslaught on civilians. But he also played a central part in the adoption of Kaisen to Denmark. At a certain point during the day-long shamanic ritual performed by Koh Sunahn for and with Kaisen, the shaman is embodied by the spirit of her grandfather, talking to her, apologizing to her.

In addition to the idea of a “discursive site,” Jane Jin Kaisen refers to her practice as one creating “new genealogies,” that is new relations between past, present, and future, by “translating otherwise”; re-reading and recombining historical narratives and silenced experiences. Her practice is in part informed by her own status as transnationally adopted, therefore sharing with a generation of adoptees and others, who have similarly been subjected to migration, what she terms a “diasporic condition,” defined by fractured histories and the lack of concrete memories.¹³

Throughout her practice, the artist herself has also often appeared in her works, but in different functions, which underscores the ambivalence of the individual body in its different appearances: as the represented in *Tracing Trades – a Parenthesis in the History of Scandinavia* (2006)¹⁴ and the representing, interrogating investigator in the video works *Tracing Trades* (2006) and *Reiterations of Dissent* (2011/16); performing the racialized body in *Amnesia Ritual for the Transborn* (2006) or a supposedly “colorblind” neutrality in *Loving Belinda* (2006-15).¹⁵ Another recent filmic work, *Braiding and Mending* (2020), portrays a group of women sitting in a circle, each braiding the hair of the one sitting in front of her. The group includes Kaisen and a couple of her sisters, cousins, and nieces, who through the black-and-white footage appear very alike. The visual similarities cover their differences. In this way, Kaisen through her practice, with the works acting as a context for each other, succeeds in questioning her own position as a subject, appearing in the works alternately as the object represented or produced and the subject who represents and produces knowledge, narratives, and possibilities. In function as the artist subject, the name to whom the work is ascribed, Kaisen also holds the position as the narrating subject, the one who collects and connect material, including her own appearance as a narrated subject.

Western princesses

As an example of the critical, archival-discursive interrogation of Korean history is the film work *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* (2010) produced by Kaisen in collaboration with Guston Sondin-Kung.

The film moves between scenes including archival footage of young women in military camps, documentation from a courtroom showing a clearly affected woman gesturing before the court before she collapses, black-and-white footage of a Korean children’s choir visiting the US,¹⁶ and recordings of current-day babies in a home, presumably meant for transnational adoption. Also, the film presents

13. Kaisen as cited in Marianne Ping Huang, “Artistic Research as Critique in Jane Jin Kaisen’s *Loving Belinda*,” in *Loving Belinda*, ed. Jane Jin Kaisen, Aarhus: Forlaget [*asterisk], 2015, 108.

14. An installation work produced together with Tobias Hübinette displaying personal photographs juxtaposed with photographs by Danish photographer Th. N. Krabbe (1861-1936) portraying people in Greenland, which for many years was under Danish colonial rule, <http://janejinkaisen.com/tracing-trades-a-parenthesis-in-the-history-of-scandinavia> (accessed 18 June 2020).

15. “Colourblindness” refers to a situation where race as a concept and category is made irrelevant or obsolete, c.f. Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigerwall in their article, “Adoption with complications: Conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents on everyday racism and ethnic identity,” *International Social Work*, vol. 53, no.4, 2010: 490.

16. In the film the children are referred to as war orphans.

interviews with adoptees and women of South Korean descent living in the US and Denmark, placing the experience of adoption at the level of forced migration and in connection to the historical (political, economic) connections between Japan, Korea, The US, Denmark and other European countries. Through its combination of archival footage and interviews, overlaid with images from Korea and the Korean community in the US today, the film traces and suggests relations between these distinct experiences of displacement and repression, emphasizing how they still resonate within the bodies of those in the present, however in different ways. Through the montage technique, a narrative is constructed that connects the histories of former comfort women at Japanese and American military bases in Korea, sex workers around military bases today, war orphans brought to the US after the Korean war by American soldiers, transnational adoptees, and members of the Korean diaspora in the US into a narrative of shared experiences of migration, exclusion and silencing in spite of the different conditions for these experiences.

The system of military prostitution during the presence of American military forces in South Korea, as well as by Japanese occupation forces in Korea before that, has a contested history. Few discussed the issue of “comfort women” until the 1990s, and several factors contributed to the silencing of these experiences.¹⁷ In 2000 an international war crimes tribunal was set up in order to attain recognition from Japan and the international community of the systematic sexual abuse of women in comfort stations. In the film we see survivors delivering their testimony and explaining the conditions they worked under, which inflicted wounds to “body and soul” that have never been repaired.

Comfort Women Tribunal testimonies (archive footage):

- Making it public was too much for me. I couldn’t tell anyone.
- I demand that the Japanese Government apologize.
- I want compensation for the wounds to my body and soul.
- Is this where you were confined and raped?
- Yes.
- How many men raped you?
- Five or six at first.
- What else did they do to you?
- They beat me all over. Ears, head, hands, arms.
- My body isn’t right even now.¹⁸

The history of the former comfort women and the subsequent attempts to attain recognition, apologies, and reparation become an example of the need to renegotiate the status these bodies have been given at a point when the system for their repression has eroded. As the film shows, however, it is equally important to be aware of new forms of repression and silencing that similarly make bodies into objects of exchange.

By including the histories of the comfort women who have been silenced, the interviewees in the film ask (themselves) what other kinds of knowledge may have been repressed and where to turn to find answers to questions such as: What systems of violence, exchange, or repression is it that the bodies have been part of? Who

17. See for instance Kathryn J. Witt, “Comfort Women: the 1946-1948 Tokyo War Crimes Trial and Historical Blindness,” *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2016): 18 or Christine Lévy, “The Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal, Tokyo 2000: a feminist response to revisionism?,” trans. Anne Epstein, *Women, Gender, History*, no. 39 (2014): 126-145.

18. *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* (00:11:1200:11:56).

are responsible for these structures of oppression? The film's genealogy traces the status of the subjected body and its possibilities of articulating these experiences of suppression from the comfort women to current-day sex workers around military bases, and a visual and narrative coupling is made between the different examples of sexual contact across history, raising questions regarding the status of sexual relationships between parties that are not politically or economically equal. The figure of the "Western princess" within this context becomes an emblem of the ambivalence inherent in the relation between South Korea and the US and Europe. Where the migration itself marks a turning point or moment of possibility for social status and state of belonging to be negotiated, the condescending flavor of the label "Western princess" indicates contempt towards the nature of the relationship that made migration possible. The figure thus becomes a vehicle for interrogating the status and possibilities of the migrated body across the different cultural contexts and from shifting perspectives, bringing attention to the exchange of values taking place in the relation between Korea and the West. And the narrative of the film even points towards regarding South Korea itself as this princess that aspires to gain status and privileges through affiliations with the West, even if it means sacrificing "her" own women and children.

Tracing the discursive formations that have produced a situation in which it has been made possible to adopt children transnationally and silence those women whose experiences would threaten the established order, *The Woman, The Orphan, and The Tiger* (2010) lays out multiple levels which are interconnected but may not necessarily be addressed through the same logics. Therefore, it also becomes an expression of how searching for "the archive" and in archives does not necessarily resolve a feeling of disorientation. In the case of adoption, several discursive formations act in tandem to make the transaction possible and legitimate. The film, however, makes visible the underlying structural asymmetries inherent in the adoption process. Where a certain discourse has framed adoption as a solution to problems of financial and social insecurity on the one hand, and of infertility on the other, the film stresses how the very same "solution" sustains oppression or discrimination against women as well as produces problems of exclusion and racialization. Here the artwork's function is at least double: it makes visible existing discursive formations and produces new genealogies, that is, new systems for the documents' organization and their signification(s).

Creating new genealogies also means disrupting the "natural" link between the produced documents, the archival order, and the singular and collective body that the archive governs. While the work is an investigation of the interconnected histories of marginalized groups in- and outside of Korean society highlighting structural oppressions that are not limited to "effects of war and militarism, but that became systematized and was sustained by patriarchy, nationalism, and class hierarchies within Korean society,"¹⁹ it also serves as a vehicle for negotiating the identities and narratives that the subjected bodies have subsequently come to represent. This connects to the notions of diaspora and migration in an expanded sense as unfin-

19 Jane Jin Kaisen, "The Emergence of Adoption Critiques among Transnational Adoptees in Denmark, conversation between Lene Myong and Jane Jin Kaisen, November 10, 2014," in *Loving Belinda*, 93-94.

ished movements; renegotiating origins, belongings, and trajectories.

The adoptee, the North Korean, the Western Princess, and princess Bari are all ambivalent figures. And it is a perhaps less amplified fact that the migrated bodies also hold the possibility, or privilege, of actually questioning existing power structures in the culture they migrated from. The adoptee may be haunted by secrets from a Korean past – but at the same time becomes the specter of an unfulfilled, yet possible, future from where things that happened in the past can be reevaluated if not reconciled.²⁰

Kaisen's works therefore may be read as reflections upon memories of migration, but equally a presentation of migratory memories; floating signifiers hesitating to embody signification, and as such directed towards the future and the viewer of the artwork as well.

The practice of assembling and putting forth

Through the different movements and formats, Kaisen combines the research of archival material to map out relations and timelines with practices of processing, coming to terms with, interpreting, and reinterpreting historical facts – documented as well as suppressed ones. Through her practice, Kaisen therefore directs attention to memories of migration and exclusion, but equally to how memories are migratory, meaning that it is possible – and in some instances necessary – to redirect programs of the past to new trajectories for the present and future.

But to produce alternative trajectories, denying using the past as a script for the present and future, depends on the development of new infrastructures and communities that counter subject positions and discourses restrained by existing power structures and knowledge formations.

In my function as an editor I have worked closely together with Jane Jin Kaisen in the process of preparing this material to be *put forth*, ready to be published. During the process it has occurred to me how Kaisen – Jane – *assembles* not just her works but the very field of discourses and practices around them. The visible works are based on the invisible work of communication and collaboration, of establishing and maintaining a network, making sure that information is circulated along the right paths. Kaisen's practice, including the production of filmic works, installations, and now also this publication, *is* this ongoing putting forth, making visible, and bringing into existence relations, connections between events, experiences, persons, and communities.

It is a mediation taking place on many levels at once, addressing different ways of embodying and belonging to, insisting on the incompleteness of the in-between as a potent potential for resisting not simply past, but more importantly, present and future discriminations. Assembling implies that “[t]he desire to be remembered and the desire to remember ‘hold together’; neither one precedes the other.”²¹ For the silenced to gain a voice it requires that someone is able to listen – and maybe even poses the question: What is your experience?

20. In line with Jacques Derrida's hauntology, according to which the appeal to turn things right comes from the future developed in *Specters of Marx. The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, London: Routledge Classics, 2006.

21. Vinciane Despret, "Inquiries raised by the dead," *HAU, Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2019): 240.