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Writing Manchukuo: Peripheral Realism and Awareness in Kang Kyöngae's *Salt*

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Abstract

In light of recent studies that situate the early twentieth-century Korean-Manchurian writer Kang Kyöngae within the global formation of colonial modernity rather than the chronicles of nationalist anticolonialism, this article argues for the relevance of Kang and of the state of Manchukuo to the ongoing study of the relationship between peripheral literary forms and capitalist modernity. Because it was an economic and ideological testing ground, Manchukuo challenges the apparent characteristics of a periphery. Examining Manchukuo's cultural and literary production thus calls for a new means of understanding peripheral literature's capacity to reveal nuanced dimensions of the capitalist world-system. This article shows how the idea of peripheral realism, a theoretical framework proposed by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye (2012), makes it possible to constellate Kang's novelistic form within new horizons of comparability and recovered histories of cultural production far from capitalism's centers. Viewed through this lens, Kang's work in turn helps to break up a falsely monolithic notion of the non-Western periphery and illustrate its variegated texture. To demonstrate this process, Kang's 1934 novella *Salt* (*Sogŭm*) is examined through the protagonist's incongruous yet highly reflective cognitive capacity, which operates as the very mode of registering and responding to Manchukuo's internal contradictions. To the extent that *Salt* attempts to grasp the reality of a complicated capitalist imperialist society from a peripheral subject's compromised vantage point, Kang stands as a consequential voice for coming to terms with peripheral realism and its possibilities.

Keywords: Kang Kyöngae, Manchukuo, peripheral realism, Japanese imperialism, Manchurian literature, Korean literature, derangement

Living as a migrant in Kando—an area largely in today's Yanbian prefecture in Northeast China—from 1931 to 1939, the prolific Korean-Manchurian writer Kang Kyöngae (1906–1944) left a rich archive of essays, letters, and novels that provides a glimpse into a vibrant locality in the thick of world-historical events. Kang was a witness to Japan's

ruthless imperial expansion across Manchuria throughout the height of her literary career, and her writings depict colonial peasant lives unraveling under harsh natural conditions, poverty, and military violence.¹ Kang's oeuvre has been widely discussed in both North Korean and South Korean scholarship.² According to Cui Hesong's account, South Korean scholarship on Kang starts to take shape in the 1970s and can be categorized into four camps of theoretical interest: the nature of Kang's realism; Kang's gender consciousness and examination of womanhood; comparative possibilities between Kang and non-Korean writers; and, lastly, the relationship between Kang's work and her "lived experience" (*ch'ehŏm*) of Manchuria (Cui 2014, 243). Although this compartmentalization, in my view, is by no means clear-cut, I argue that there is more work to be done in the last category—historical contextualization—that attends to Manchukuo's specificity as a politico-economic space. This is the angle Cui himself employs when he underscores Kang's indebtedness to Manchuria's Korean male socialist activists. Yi Sangkyŏng, a pioneer in Kang Kyŏngae studies, tracks Kang's earliest travels to northern Manchuria and her encounter with proletarian internationalism, the marks of which are evident in Kang's later works (Yi 2017). Nayoung Aimee Kwon foregrounds Manchukuo in Anglophone scholarship and interprets Kang's stories as "revealing the anxieties of imperial borderline encounters and [raising] complex questions about the triangulated position of Korea in between Japan and China"; this perspective in turn helps complicate the "simplistic binary of resistance versus collaboration" that emerged as a by-product of postcolonial nationalism (Kwon 2015, 178).³ All three scholars' efforts situate Kang within the transnational formation of colonial modernity rather than the discourse of nationalist anticolonialism.

This article expands the conversation about Kang Kyŏngae by advocating for the relevance of her writing about Manchukuo to ongoing studies of how peripheral literary forms register the combined and uneven development of the modern world-system.⁴ Given Manchukuo's uniqueness as a periphery that was central to the Japanese

¹ For a concise yet comprehensive overview of Kang's life in English, see Kim (2013).

² South Korean scholarship gained momentum only after the government lifted the ban on the publication and research of "writers who went North" (*wolbuk chakka*) in the late 1980s. For a side-by-side comparison of Kang's different treatments in the two Koreas, see Kim et al. (2006), a collection of essays produced under the collaboration of North and South Korean critics. A prominent tendency shared within North Korean scholarship is the celebratory interpretation of Kang as a relentless proponent of Communism, a tendency also found in the 1985 North Korean film adaptation of *Salt*.

³ For an article that does not discuss Manchukuo but is helpful in thinking about Kang's relationship to global literary contexts, see Perry (2013), which puts Kang's longest work, the novel *The Human Problem* (*In'gan munje*, 1934), in productive conversation with the genre of the Western Bildungsroman.

⁴ The phrase "combined and uneven development" is originally attributed to Leon Trotsky. Here I find helpful the Warwick Research Collective's (WReC) deployment of the phrase to identify the formal, generic, and aesthetic connectedness in the "typology of combined and uneven development" (2015, 17).

imperialist vision of a utopic future, it is well worth considering how literature that emerges from this space encodes in narrative the superimposition of colonial modernity over its complicated demography. Kang, whose work strove to expose the lives of impoverished Korean peasants in Manchukuo, must be considered a critical figure in this literature.



Figure 1. Self-portrait by author Kang Kyöngae.
Source: *Yösong* magazine, Nov. 1939.

My aim is first to historicize Manchukuo's position in the development of the modern world-system. This context will lay the groundwork for showing how the concept of "peripheral realism," a theoretical framework articulated by Jed Esty and Colleen Lye (2012), provides a productive means for placing Kang into a more expansive literary understanding. Peripheral realism makes it possible to simultaneously constellate Kang's novelistic form within new horizons of comparability and recovered histories of variegated cultural production in capitalism's peripheries. To substantiate this claim, I turn to Kang's 1934 novella *Salt* (*Sogŭm*), the author's longest work set in Manchukuo. The destructive colonial order of Manchukuo does not afford Kang the ideological tools or values through which to produce a coherent aesthetic form. In this sense, *Salt* is a product of "historical derangement," a term Sanjay Krishnan uses to describe the peripheral conditions of being "violently inducted into modern institutions of production and exchange" (2012, 434). But in Kang's sympathetic treatment, through which she preserves the cognitive awareness of her subjects, we can discover an unlikely perspective that registers and critiques the global dynamics of power.

An inquiry into Kang's peripherality requires discussion of recently renewed academic concern with the history of literary realism in the peripheries of capitalist centers.⁵ "Peripheral Realisms Now," a special 2012 issue of *Modern Language Quarterly*, is the most notable instantiation of this interest, and provides an analytic for uncovering the traces of realism in peripheral, transnational, and colonial regions. The framework of peripheral realism is valuable for redressing the debilitating notion of realism as a bygone form by urging literary studies to reinvigorate realism's radical credentials, which were lost with the fall of the Soviet Union. The understanding of

⁵ The term "peripheral" originally draws from world-systems theory, notably Immanuel Wallerstein's economic terminology of core, periphery, and semi-periphery. Wallerstein spatializes the modern capitalist world-system into regional zones according to their roles in the global economy. For an encapsulated version of the idea, see Wallerstein (2004).

realism as a form “meant not to reproduce reality but to interrupt the quasi-natural perception of reality as a mere given” is vital to recovering peripheral novels that are critically realist in the Lukáćian vein—oriented toward the deep dynamics of historical and material forces informing their social referent (Esty and Lye 2012, 277).⁶ These efforts to uncover the correspondence between social structures and literary form can be traced back to earlier moments of peripheral criticism, such as Roberto Schwarz’s influential work on “the dialectic of literary form and social process” in the Brazilian context (Schwarz 2012, 10).⁷

The concept of peripheral realism helps make it possible to see Kang as both Manchukuo’s and global modernity’s writer, with realism providing the connecting tissue. But while preserving the language of (semi-)periphery and core, which keeps open the possibility of constellating literatures of under-discussed regions and spaces, it seems pertinent here to consider *whose* periphery Manchukuo is. The notion that Europe is not the “singular repository of capitalism” is especially important in Kang’s case, given that Japan not only enters the capitalist world-system as a unique force but also takes a distinct course in developing its peripheries (Choi 2003, 336).⁸ The most important distinction here is that, in order to overcome its status as a latecomer to imperialism and emerge as a fully capitalist empire, Japan needed “to sanctify and legitimise its colonial project as ‘redeeming Asia from the exploitation of the West’” (Choi 2003, 333). That is, Japan’s capitalist expansion via imperialism crucially depended on the ideological and polemical development of the social and cultural sphere. What consequences do such conditions hold, then, for the consciousness of Manchukuo’s peripheral subjects? Moreover, how does the way in which capitalist modernity manifested in colonial spaces of Japan add to or shift existing conceptions of literary peripheries? In other words, do Japan’s peripheries produce a distinct kind of peripheral literature?

In her essay, “The Pan-Asian Empire and World Literatures,” Sowon Park takes up these queries by introducing East Asia as a hitherto neglected perspective in thinking about world literature. She explores the possibility of imagining coherence in literature beyond the nation while tending to the epistemic divergences that arise from Japan’s

⁶ Peripheral realism has been met with a search for peripheral “irrealism” deployed by the WReC. Despite the seemingly contrasting takes on the kind of form that peripheral literatures share, Lye argues that realism “persists within and even defines the WReC’s method of reading modernist or experimental forms that are ‘irrealist’ in appearance” (Lye 2016, 345). That is, the debates share a desire to seek out literature that is realist in their attempt to grasp totality, or capitalism’s creation of uneven relations of power between regions and classes, whether or not the outward form of that desire is recognizably or conventionally understood to be realist.

⁷ See also Schwarz (2001) for a book-length study of the relationship between aesthetic form and social content in the work of Machado de Assis.

⁸ Also see Cumings, who traces the history of Japanese capitalism, noting that, unlike many European cases, Japan’s “lateral expansion” involved “a highly articulated, disciplined, penetrating colonial bureaucracy” that combined military power with aggressive development agendas such as land reforms and infrastructural groundwork (1984, 10).

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mode of imperialism, which “required a restructuring of the feudal system into an industrial capitalist state, but also a specifically Asian ideology” (2013, 4). An East Asian perspective, Park argues, does not prompt one to discard the concepts of center and periphery but provides an “additional and atypical model” in that the disparate regional responses to Japan’s absorption and dissemination of European literary texts produce East Asia as a “‘surrogate periphery’ with Tokyo as the center of that periphery” (2013, 8). Even though practitioners of world-systems theory like Immanuel Wallerstein and Giovanni Arrighi undercut the simplicity of a binary system by developing the concept of semi-peripheries, Park distances herself from that language, which describes politico-economic mediation. Rather, she opts to specify Japan’s particular and forceful development of cultural and ideological relationships between itself and its peripheries. Whereas Park provides an overview of how Japan’s pan-Asianism guided the dissemination of European literature’s translation and adaptation in the colonies, this article takes a ground-up approach to peripheral literatures by examining the relationship between Manchukuo’s distinctive material conditions and literary form through the case study of Kang. This case also illuminates a dimension of world literature that Park neglects, namely, a world literature that is co-constituted by the Soviet Union and Japan, a model that makes more sense when considering Kang and colonial Korea’s socialist writers. Although Park’s idea that East Asian literature prompts an understanding of world literature as multicentric is certainly useful, the centers excavated here are the Soviet Union (rather than Western Europe) and Japan. But, most importantly, situating Kang’s novella *Salt* in world literature means examining its relationship to the deeper social structures of Manchukuo.

The Question of Manchukuo Literature

Imperial Japan had ambitious geostrategic and economic interests in making Manchukuo a central part of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere (*Taedongga kongyǒng*), a self-sufficient economic bloc consisting of Japan, Manchukuo, Korea, China’s eastern parts, and Southeast Asian nations. Prasenjit Duara argues that Manchukuo was the world’s first instantiation of “the new imperialism,” a particular form of empire that “reflected a strategic conception of the periphery as part of an organic formation designed to attain global supremacy for the imperial power” (2006a, 2). Manchukuo was not simply the periphery of the West but also both a periphery of Tokyo in a multicentric world-system and an “autonomous empire within an empire” (Hotta 2007, 110).⁹ This particular economic and geopolitical configuration posits Manchukuo as a strange and atypical kind of periphery burdened with imperial visions for its rise as part of the imperial “core.” Louise Young succinctly describes Manchukuo as a space in which these inextricable ties between capitalism and cultural, social, military, and political spheres created a “total empire” that was once very real and “took

⁹ For the history of the diverse nationalities in Manchuria prior to the occupation, see S. Park (2016).

place in the realm of the imagination” (1998, 17). To add to the complexity, the strong Chinese presence in the region meant that it was a hotbed of multiple ambitions. Hyun Ok Park explains, “Although the Japanese and Chinese powers competed for territorial sovereignty in Manchuria, they shared dreams of the capitalist development of agriculture. It was within the entangled relationship between the Japanese and Chinese powers that Koreans (and Chinese) found an interstitial space where they sought to negotiate with both” (2005, 20).

Japan’s economic vision for Manchukuo required ideological grounds that assigned colonial relations differently from that of European models. Kari Shepherdson-Scott notes that “Japanese political, military, and economic state institutions cultivated the image of Manchukuo as an ideal, multiethnic state and a ‘paradise’ (*rakudo*) for settlement in order to generate domestic support and to legitimize occupation on the world stage” (2012, 9). The Japanese state’s term for this idealized image of a unified Asian front is *ojok hyŏphwa* in Korean, meaning the “harmony of the five races.” Duara traces the inspiration of Manchukuo’s ideological constitution to Soviet promotion of interethnic harmony: “Several political analysts in Manchukuo drew their ideas of nationality from the Soviet model. Tominaga Tadashi...notes admiringly, that nationalism was not suppressed but utilized positively for the goals of the socialist state” (2006b, 9). Thus, Manchukuo was not simply a periphery subjected to colonial capitalist exploitation but instead was made into a testing ground of overlapping ideals and practices. It was, in fact, a space that was being fast-tracked to play the role of the imperial utopic proxy core on the continent.

But although the Kwantung Army had such ambitious economic and ideological visions in store for Manchukuo, the actual implementation of Japan’s policies hardly met expectations. From 1931 to 1933—the early years of Manchukuo providing the backdrop of *Salt*—the economic implementation and the enforcement of interethnic cooperation was vague and without structure.¹⁰ One of the army’s strategies of invasion was to co-opt the local elites whose distance from the Chinese metropole allowed a degree of independence. When it came to the larger ideal of cultivating multiethnic coexistence, however, this approach had the opposite result from what was intended. In the vacuum of economic and ideological control in the early period of colonial hold over Manchuria, Manchukuo took on different valences of significance for different anti-imperial collectives, in that it became a critical frontier for Chinese Communists, Korean socialist-nationalists, and Japanese leftist intellectuals.¹¹ The boundaries between these

¹⁰ See Mitter, “Even as late as 1 March 1933...the Manchukuo government’s published plan for economic construction was ‘vague and general,’ although it was made clear that the government intended to control strategic industries and aim for agricultural self-sufficiency. This lack of decisions on the policy in the new state explains why so little appeared to change in economic terms in the initial phase of the occupation” (2000, 76).

¹¹ See, for example, Smith, who provides an account of how Chinese women-authored texts shed light on Japanese imperialism in Manchukuo (2007), and Culver, who tracks Japanese left-wing

groups were not always clear, to wit: Korean Communists in China were obligated to integrate themselves into the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) under the direction of the Sixth Comintern Congress in 1928, but they continued to equate national causes with their socialist activities. They were persecuted in turn by anticommunist, pro-Japanese Koreans (*Minsaengdan*), who attempted to dismantle the alliance between Chinese and Korean Communists.¹² From the trajectories of such interwoven alliances and conflicting interests, we can conclude that, with the establishment of Manchukuo, the Manchu region underwent a transformation in multiple national and other collective imaginations. From an imperial Japanese perspective, it became an “elevated” periphery interlaced with a projection of imperial desire and futurity. From the Chinese, Korean, and Japanese left-wing angles, it was a hinterland repurposed as the political center of anti-imperial activities. On an ideological level, Manchukuo afforded some Koreans a choice to refuse the enforcement of *naesŏn ilch’e*—the idea, propagated in Korea, that Japan and Korea are of “one body”—and to live instead under Manchukuo’s slogan of multiethnic harmony, however fraught the practice (Kim 2014, 2). On a practical level, particularly for the stateless Korean peasantry, Manchuria offered both the literal grounds for self-sufficient agricultural labor and the symbolic grounds for survival. It is important to note that other persecuted ethnic groups in Manchukuo often failed to make the distinction between Koreans and Japanese. However, Manchukuo seems to have been an attractive option to Korean peasants compared with the systematic oppression of identity expression in Korea.¹³

Because Manchukuo with its politico-economic history evades any simple center-periphery binary model, examining its cultural and literary production suggests the capacity of peripheral literature to reveal more nuanced dimensions of the world-system. That is, cultural expressions register more than the strictly economic dynamics that define a periphery and instead represent the lived experience within a society, suspended in what Raymond Williams calls “structures of feeling” (1977, 132). In this view, surely the entangled dreams that pervaded Manchukuo mark the works of writers like Kang.

intellectuals who, alongside Korean intellectuals and artists, found Manchukuo “a space for the projection of various ideological and cultural dreams” (2013, 23).

¹² On the relations between Korean and Chinese Communists, Vladimir Tikhonov writes, “Korean exclusion of resident Chinese, combined with admiration for China’s revolutions, was paralleled by the outbursts of anti-Korean sentiments in China and the contrast between such sentiments on the ground and the official pronouncements for Sino-Korean solidarity at both Guomindang and Chinese Communist Party headquarters. Both Korean and Chinese nationalisms were alienated by the Japanese expansion on the continent in the first half of the twentieth century, but the political alliance between them did not imply blurring of the ethnic boundaries: on the contrary, modern developments worked rather to reify them” (2016, 186).

¹³ For a detailed account of the migration of Korean peasants as an “osmotic process,” see the first chapter of Park (2005).

Contextualizing Kang Kyŏngae in this way starts to shed light on her trajectory as a writer who is as anomalous as Manchukuo is atypical. On the one hand, although Kang is often invoked as a Korean realist writer and a “fellow traveler” of the Korean Artista Proleta Federacio (KAPF), the official center of Korean socialist artistic activities in the late 1920s and early 1930s, she differed from her urban and mostly male Korean contemporaries. Her connection to recognized global and regional movements, such as socialist internationalism or anti-Japanese resistance, is more tenuous than that of the KAPF, not least because she had a lower economic status than the many KAPF writers who had the means to study in Japan. On the other hand, Kang was hardly like some other contemporary writers of Manchukuo, in that she did not participate in the quest to lay cultural claims on the land, as did the historian Sin Ch’aeho by incorporating Manchuria into the scope of Korean national history, or measuring up Manchukuo’s success or failure in fulfilling Japan’s idealized vision, as did pro-Japanese writers like Chang Hyŏkchu and Chŏng Int’aek.¹⁴ Kang’s works are thematically closer to those of literary writers like An Sukil, Choe Sŏhae, and Yi Kiyŏng, who traveled to or lived in Kando and depicted its peasant life. But no Korean-Manchurian writer of the 1930s focused on women’s lives in as much detail as Kang. This commitment to colonized, impoverished, migrant Korean female subjects maps Kang onto political, literary, and geographical peripheries, but in such marginalization Kang finds unique ways of giving novelistic form to the social and political content of Manchukuo.

The novella *Salt* is exemplary in illustrating Kang’s refusal to portray Manchukuo as anything other than what it is: a paradoxical space whose social history suggests conquest, oppression, and neglect coexisting simultaneously with liberation, utopic visions, and hope. The complexity of social relations in *Salt* reveals Kang’s deep commitment to realism, in that the text represents and registers the social relations and subjective experiences that undergo transformation in the unfolding of colonial modernity. From the most peripheral vantage point, the text approaches an experience of the world-system as one that can be articulated, however mediated and fractional that articulation might be. That is, it is ultimately the local, the quotidian, and the marginal subject and author who can give language to the dynamics of the global.

¹⁴ Manchukuo’s critical importance as a periphery burdened with carrying the imperial utopic future galvanized both the Japanese state and Korean colonial subjects into laying competing cultural claims on the land. For studies of Chang Hyŏkchu and Chŏng Int’aek, see Kim (2014) and Seo (2014), respectively. For an example of how Japanese policing influenced the Korean literary scene in Manchukuo through interference with the publication process of the Manchurian newspaper *Mansŏn ilbo*, see Jin (2009, 15–27). Regarding Korean nationalist rewritings of Manchuria like Sin’s, Andre Schmid notes that archeological discoveries of Korean relics in the region “stimulated [for Koreans] a nostalgia and romantic yearning for a stronger, more ancient Korea when the lands to the north were not occupied by others” (2002, 226).

Derangement and Reflection in *Salt*

The concerns of *Salt* are legible in Kang's nonfiction writings from the same period. In a short, impressionistic essay written on a winter night, Kang elucidates the overall effect of Manchukuo life as foreign, disorienting, and even absurd, as in the following lament:

This is Kando. The land borders Siberia in the northwest, Chosŏn in the southeast. It is a land that is negative forty degrees when it is cold. After toiling on the land, [the poor farmers] cry in the extreme cold! Seventy-five *chŏn* for one *tu* of white rice, two *wŏn* and twenty *chŏn* for one *tu* of table salt, at a whopping three times the price of rice!... The situation that surrounds this land is inescapably complicated. This land has lost neutrality in between extremes. (Kang [1933] 1999, 744)¹⁵

Kang is first baffled by the prices that she deems preposterously out of scale—what was once a common condiment in Korea has become an unaffordable luxury. But the observation of a world out of proportion, as it were, segues into Kang's awakening to the larger, "inescapably complicated" political and economic dynamics of Manchukuo around the salt tax.¹⁶ The unjust order of the empire is viscerally felt at its newly made borders.

It seems that Kang, to her surprise, found the local inhabitants of Manchukuo to be no less perceptive than she in detecting the illogic of their shared world. In a vignette from the following year, she recalls a lumberjack who deceived her into buying a stack of poor-quality firewood. When Kang confronts him, the man does not apologize for his misdeed but instead retorts, "When all things [deceive], why should a tree not do the same?" (Kang [1934b] 1999, 748). Kang writes that the matter-of-fact quality of the response astonished her into paying full price for the wood, and she expresses curiosity and admiration for Kando's peasants. What captures her admiration is the capacity of the peculiar remark to tersely but incisively distill a profound outlook acquired from the lived experience. This image of the peasant, lucidly understanding the absurd, inhumane material conditions in which they must operate, appears in many of Kang's stories set in Kando. For example, the Korean laborer in "Existence, Nonexistence" ("Yumu," [1934a] 1999) surprises the narrator with the clarity with which he describes a suspiciously real dream in which his wife and baby are massacred. In "Mother and Child" ("Moja," [1935] 1999), the mother walks into a deadly snowstorm with a newfound determination for

¹⁵ All translations of Kang in this article are mine, and any faults or mistakes are mine and mine only. Original texts found in reprinted form in *Kang Kyŏngae chŏnjip*, edited by Yi Sangkyŏng (1999).

¹⁶ Tax on salt was one of the main sources of revenue for the Manchurian government even before the establishment of Manchukuo. Once in power, the Kwantung Army took over existing infrastructures to secure continuous profit: "In 1932 the government assumed responsibility for the collection of maritime tariffs and the salt monopoly, and unified customs and tax collection" (Paine 2010, 75).

life. In “Underground Village” (“Chihach’on,” [1936] 1999), the beggar, once an exemplary factory worker, hints at knowing that his disabled legs involve larger structural forces at play. These glimpses afford Manchukuo’s wretched inhabitants incomplete but sober awareness of the internal contradictions of colonialism, capitalism, and structural poverty. But perhaps none provides as detailed a sketch of Manchukuo’s disoriented yet conscious subject as does *Salt*, which tracks the hardships of a Korean woman who comes to make her living by smuggling salt across the Korean border. The story’s protagonist, named simply “Pongyŏm’s mother” (hereafter, “the mother”), stands out not only in her relentless survival in the maddened circumstances of her world, but also in the way that she first exposes and then refuses to make sense of Manchukuo’s incomprehensibility.

Set in the southern Manchurian city of Yongjŏng (Ch. Longjing), the novella is an unflinching depiction of an impoverished Korean tenant farming family that disintegrates after the father is murdered by communist guerillas, allegedly for his dealings with a local Chinese landlord, P’angdung. Pongsik, the son, leaves the despondent mother, while the mother and Pongyŏm, the daughter, take temporary residence in P’angdung’s household, where they are employed as menial workers. P’angdung rapes and impregnates the mother, and he soon drives her and Pongyŏm out of his house, reasoning that he witnessed Pongsik’s execution for being a Communist. The mother, distraught at the news that her son had joined the people who had killed his father, wanders the barren land and gives birth to Ponghŭi, her second daughter, in a shed. With the help of a Korean acquaintance, the mother becomes a live-in wet nurse for a wealthier Korean household, but her own neglected daughters later die of poverty-related illnesses. The mother eventually joins a group of Korean salt smugglers who take advantage of Japan’s salt monopoly in Manchukuo. When the group encounters communist guerillas on their journey, the mother is surprised that the Communists do not steal from her and actually seem interested in her welfare. The novella concludes with her capture by the Japanese police at the end of her treacherous journey.

In this disparaging story told through a kind of free indirect narration—weaving in and out of the suffering consciousness of the mother—is it possible to identify a narrative impulse that grasps at some order beneath the misfortunes? Critics of *Salt* have predominantly framed the mother’s encounter with Communists as the story’s inflection point and a revelatory moment for the mother, in which she corrects her misjudgments about the guerillas and comes to recognize them as allies against Japanese oppression.¹⁷ Reading the story’s last scenes as resolving the tension between

¹⁷ For a few examples of readings that emphasize the Communist appearance in *Salt* as the critical turning point of the narrative direction, see Kim (2000, 97) and, in Kim et al. (2006), the works of Ha Chŏngil (15), Ha Sangil (57), Kim Chŏngung (205), and Oh Hyangsuk (236–237). In contrast to such readings, Nayoung Aimee Kwon (2015, 182–183) criticizes the interpretive desire to exaggerate the mother’s resistance and to read nationalistic undertones where there are none. Kwon sees the novella as coopted by the Korean “postcolonial regime of realism, a politicized demand for the representation of colonial reality (which often means an exposé of

the Communists and the mother casts the latter as a divided subject who enters the world ignorant and is saved by enlightenment brought by external forces. Such a reading obscures Kang's depiction of the mother's strikingly complex self-understanding throughout her hardships.¹⁸ By tracking the moments of apparent inconsistency in the narrative of the mother's psychology, I would like to offer a different account of subject formation, in which the mother is a consistently "aware" or reflective figure whose seemingly incongruous and confused moments operate as the very mode of registering deeper historical predicaments.

A helpful point of reference for my reading of *Salt* can be found in the notion of historical derangement advanced by Sanjay Krishnan, mentioned earlier. In his study of the British-based Indo-Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul, Krishnan sets out to correct the discomfort that Naipaul's caustic representation of the peripheries carries for postcolonial critics. Bridging Naipaul's fictional and nonfictional accounts, Krishnan reads Naipaul's unsympathetic portrayal of peripheral societies as conveying an attentiveness—rather than contempt or Eurocentrism—that must accompany the task of writing about the peripheries. Naipaul understands that a peripheral writer, in encountering the "deranging effects" of modernity, must leave untreated "the absence or failure of the epistemic interface we are treated to by Cartesian rationality" (Krishnan 2012, 449). In other words, the systematic nature of the capitalist world can be grasped only by authors who have the privilege of a vantage point. Not all peripheral writers, however, lack this viewpoint. For example, Brazilian writers in Roberto Schwarz's analyses are able to express the social contradictions of their nation with the help of mediating ideologies that allow them to "claim metropolitan values" while experimenting with distinctive formal gestures (Krishnan 2012, 442). But Krishnan's Naipaul must contemplate the lack of coherent ideological prisms through which to seamlessly make sense of his peripheral society. Thus derangement—the undergirding reason why postcolonial critics find Naipaul unpalatable—becomes a mode of writing that carries the inevitable mark of the periphery's violent integration into modernity. Thus, Krishnan assesses the derangement informing Naipaul's work as a potentially productive method of analyzing peripheral realisms, remarking, "[Derangement] makes available perspectives derived from shared but diverse expressions of peripheral historicity" (2012, 435).

colonial exploitation by Japan and colonial resistance by Korea)" (2015, 175). Approaching the issue from a feminist angle, Sunyoung Park also notes that nationalist desires to celebrate the "salvific love" of the mother prevents the more nuanced reading of Kang's feminism; "Kang's destructive exposure of a failing motherhood" allows instead for "a positive recasting of domesticity in truer and more responsible terms" (Park 2015, 220). Both Kwon and Park guide my reading of *Salt* as a story of ambivalence, contradictions, and limitations, rather than a linear tale of ideological gains.

¹⁸ Here I differ from Kwon's claim that "the story is more about the utter lack of access to this reality" (2015, 182) to argue that the mother's lucid perception of her own limitations proves a more complicated picture of the character.

In demonstrating the making of a peripheral history, *Salt's* initial treatment of Manchukuo complements Naipaul's rendering of peripheral society. The novella's opening evidences a tumultuous landscape that differs from the impoverished Korean village under systematic exploitation, familiar from stories penned by the KAPF:

The *Powitan* [保衛團, Chinese Army] would roam the farmland, taking what they could to supplement their meager wages. But nowadays, the army did not hesitate to threaten and steal from peasants in broad daylight. The peasants knew they had to have money or rice ready to preserve their lives. Then the Communists arrived, which led the landlords and the army to flee for the cities and to never venture into Communist-occupied territories even on occasional return visits. But times changed once more, and the *Chawitan* [自衛團, pro-Japanese vigilante corps] appeared while the Communists retreated. ([1934c] 1999, 492)

This vision of a political landscape in constant turmoil reveals a traumatic and violent emergence into modernity marked by the struggle among communist guerillas, Chinese landlords of a pre-existing economic system, and peasant paramilitary groups under Japanese control. It quickly achieves a sense of simultaneous colonial extraction and refuge, of noncapitalist agrarian and capitalist modes of production, of multiracial cohabitation and hostility. From then on, Kang's narration goes through rapid changes in scale, oscillating between a bird's-eye view of Manchukuo's palimpsest-like world, crudely overlain with capitalist structures, and the protagonist's listless glance at a flag mounted on a clay wall—the former, an emblem of Japanese occupiers; the latter, the remnants of peasant toil under the preceding regime of Chinese landlords ([1934c] 1999, 493). Directionless modernity unfolds alongside the protagonist's quandaries over her ugly nails and wonderings about how to make food palatable in the absence of salt.

Derangement and incongruity are certainly a part of Manchukuo's constitution in *Salt*. But it cannot be ignored that Kang is hardly as unsympathetic toward her peasant characters as Naipaul is toward his subjects. Kang's exposure to socialist principles may have contributed to this trait, as Cui (2014, 248–249) notes. However, it is clear from personal essays like “Kando” ([1934] 1999) that Kang's sympathy for the peasants is very much grounded in everyday interaction with them and a faith in their cognitive abilities to recognize, even without fully comprehending, the social contradictions that shape their lives. This is not to say that deranged circumstances in Kang's writings demonstrate an “epistemic privilege” on her part or her characters'. But Kang is compelled to find potential within paucity, as she is compelled to preserve in her characters the fragmented and vertiginous capacity to reflect, which cannot change reality but is active nonetheless. Such writing procures a future by locating *discordant awareness*—even if that awareness must take the form of discordance or interruption itself—and recalls that Manchukuo, in its social constitution, was a periphery shot

through with the contesting hopes of imperialism and revolution. The mother's psychological travails, however myopic they might seem, are therefore at once the product and prism of Manchukuo's formation.

In moments when the effects of historical derangement encroach most prominently on the mother's subjectivity, we see a kind of psychological response tinged with self-awareness that is far from any form comparable to bourgeois interiority or metropolitan rationality. Two scenes in the novella particularly characterize Kang's rendering of such derangement. The first scene occurs after the widowed protagonist is raped and impregnated by P'angtung. In the aftermath of this sexual violence, she is filled with desire for her assailant's love.¹⁹ The passage is worth quoting at some length for its portrait of an erratic mind:

She felt an endless stream of affection toward P'angtung. She sighed and wiped the sweat off her forehead. When will I be able to talk to him comfortably and receive his love? The mere thought gave her shivers of joy. But when she realized the predicament her life was in, she wanted to cry. She envied P'angtung's wife.... She tried to fight him to death but lost, and now she was pregnant with his child. When she considered this, it did not seem that the crime was hers. But why was she unable to express all this to P'angtung? And why did she have to suppress even her desire to eat a bowl of cold noodles? "Why can't I tell him? Why hesitate? I will tell him so. I will. And that I want a bowl of noodles," she thought, and her mouth watered as she imagined the sight of the noodles. But realizing that such a thought was merely a thought, she sighed and chuckled at herself. The fact that she wanted noodles so childishly, when all kinds of problems surrounded her like mountains, seemed ridiculous and pathetic. But nothing can be done about hunger. The throat itches from it. ([1934c] 1999, 507)

The mother's longing for her assailant—difficult to interpret, for both the reader and the victim herself—is interrupted by the recognition that gross injustice has been committed against her. This is a potentially formative moment in which the mother refuses self-blame. But that sense is quickly overthrown by a digressive craving for a bowl of cold noodles (*naengmyŏn*) that, she angrily realizes, P'angtung's money could buy her. These bouts of fixation and self-perception are incongruous and discordant in

¹⁹ See Berlant for a provocative reading of the relationship between mass crisis and problematic attachments that provide "negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently" (2011, 14). Berlant defines these attachments as "cruel" in that "the subjects who have *x* in their lives might not well endure the loss of their object/scene of desire, even though its presence threatens their well-being, because whatever the *content* of the attachment is, the continuity of its form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world" (2011, 24).

form, alternating between the “mountains” of problems that weigh on her existence and a bowl of noodles. The mother is fully cognizant of her unquenchable physical hunger for cold noodles as inappropriate and untimely. She makes, however, an extraordinary move to let her desire take its course, and allows herself to feel her own deficient reason: “But nothing can be done about hunger.” Here, the slip into present tense, although frequent enough throughout the novella, becomes charged with a declarative power and makes it unclear as to whether the wielder of the revelatory voice is the mother, the narrator, or Kang. The mother’s self-aware irrationality, the catalyst of which is ineradicable hunger, becomes both a symptom of and defiance against the logic of her gendered and colonized reality.

In the second scene that demonstrates Kang’s rendering of derangement, the mother undergoes another moment of misidentification when she discovers that her two daughters have starved to death while she served as a wet nurse for an infant in a wealthier Korean household. In the course of grieving for her own dead children, the mother becomes obsessed by desire to lay claim on Myöngsu, the child for whom she has been caring:

She got up. She paced the room to stop her thinking. But the painful memories were like fire sparks and could not be stopped. Now Myöngsu’s face enters her mind and whirls about. He smiles. “I wonder if he is crying...” she wondered out loud, and tried to distract herself by uttering things she did not mean. “You bastard, Pongyö̃m and Ponghŭi died because of you. Go away!” But Myöngsu’s face draws closer, so much so that she could touch him if she reached out... She bites her hand. The pain of missing the child is as much as the pain in her hand. ([1934c] 1999, 524)

As much as *Salt* is a story of the mother’s working body, here it becomes a tale of an overwhelmed mind, loaded with uncontrollable thoughts. The mother’s anguish stems from recognizing her love as nonsensical—her love for the child who literally drained her of the nutrients that could have fed her own children. She bites her hand as a form of self-punishment, but the feeling is only reinforced. That the mother fails to remedy her own fixation, despite rationalizing self-talk, exemplifies the entangled relationship between emotional attachment and deranged realities. Just as she has serviced the future of others, while facing the impossibility of her own future, she cannot properly mourn her daughters because of the emotional ties that her labor has produced. In fact, Manchukuo makes mourning structurally impossible: if Ponghŭi, the illegitimate female child, physically materializes the realities of the mother’s experience as a precarious female subject, the likelihood of sustaining that future is shadowed by the legitimacy of (and the mother’s own recognition of) Myöngsu’s viable future. In other words, the mother’s doomed desire to “mother” Myöngsu then becomes a form

of desire to associate with a future that is denied to her—a desire that does not know the proper boundaries between “us and them” and is monstrously consuming.

The episodes concerning P’angdung and Myöngsu exemplify the tension between the mother’s overabundant desires and her capacity to *understand*, however partially, the inevitability of those desires. The desires are ultimately unstoppable insofar as they are desires for a viable future, whether as a Chinese landlord’s wife or a wealthier (and male) Korean, but also doomed, as she herself recognizes. In short, this cognitive tension expresses the contradictoriness of Manchukuo’s reality, namely, to the state’s denial of a future to those who cannot accept colonial modernity as a rational and undisturbing reality. The mother’s incorrigible irrationality—the meta-self that observes herself trapped in Manchukuo’s social fabric— reveals in its wake the very irrationality of Manchukuo’s constitution, much like the firewood seller’s potent rhetorical question in Kang’s memory.

Tracing how Manchukuo’s social unevenness provides cause for the mother’s “confused yet lucid” subjectivity yields in a more ambivalent reading of *Salt*’s ending than what has been provided in most accounts of the novella. The impasses of colonial reality culminate in the most difficult challenge against the mother’s ability to reflect, namely, the contradiction between communist violence and socialist hope. After losing her daughters, the mother commits herself to the treacherous illegal trade of salt smuggling. Whereas her previous experiences were shaped predominantly by isolation, the community of smugglers offers the mother a heightened sense of solidarity that does not exist in the rest of the novella. But even when the mother nearly drowns in a river while trying to protect her assigned load of salt, and the leader of the salt pack risks his own life to save her, a possible form of compassion is inextricable from its boundedness to the logic of minimizing loss and maximizing profit. It is during this haphazard journey to outsmart the colonial tax system that the smugglers encounter the Communists, whose men have killed—so the mother was told by Pongsik—the mother’s husband. The Communists, symbolically positioned at the border of Korea and Manchuria, impart a message to awaken the smugglers to the deeper injustices of their dire reality:

“People! Do you know why you toil under your loads of salt in the middle of the night, deprived of sleep?” A metallic and stately voice rises and falls with the wind. “Right, Communists! At least they won’t confiscate the salt,” the smugglers thought, as they wondered how they should plead their release. The more the voice continued, the more they wished to be released. They were becoming increasingly worried that the [Japanese] security forces might be hiding in or on the other side of the mountains and discover that they have been listening to the lecture of the Communists. Pongyöm’s mother recalled the time when she went to Pongyöm’s school in Ssandöğöu and heard a teacher speak, and noted how similar this voice was to the teacher’s. She raised her

head and peered into the dark. But under the veil of darkness, only the voice traveled. Is Pongsik with them? She quickly dismissed the worry. She concluded that Pongsik was unusually smart and thus would never join such people. ([1934c] 1999, 534–535)

The voice detached from any identifiable body becomes one with the atmosphere and the night, as if the message of Communism is propagated not so much by the guerillas but as a counter-logic of sorts endemic to the very environment of Manchukuo. The speech, on the one hand, seems to urge self-reflection as a path toward reclaiming their labor. On the other hand, the speech is ironic: the smugglers are distracted listeners precisely because they are aware of their critical situation as victims at the crossroads of the Communists and the Japanese security guards. Moreover, as seen earlier in this article, the mother has repeatedly demonstrated that her fragmented but active powers of reflection grasp the social relationships that oppress her in complex ways. The power of the speech, then, is diminished in the narrative context, making the encounter more hollow and anticlimactic than revelatory. Adding to this effect, the mother regains her capacity for effusive contemplation to locate the contradictoriness of this encounter after her release:

As she calmed herself down, it occurred to her that those people were indeed Communists. She scoffed contemptuously at herself for having been paralyzed in front of them and considered herself the most wretched person on earth. She stood face to face with her enemies who had killed her husband and pushed her into desperation. In that moment, she could not even dare feel the abomination that she always had toward them. Ah! Here she is, moving her two legs under the bag of salt, because she wants to live. It was laughable. ([1934c] 1999, 535)

With this reemergence of the mother's reflective voice in the narrative, it becomes clear that the Communists offer her neither a resolution to a world replete with contradictions nor a cohesive understanding of her lived experience. The Communists' gesture to stand together against the common enemy of Japanese imperialists cannot simply overwrite the destruction of the mother's domestic world and palliate the pain with idealism. In a sense, then, the Communists become yet one more dimension of Manchukuo's irrationality.

The novella nonetheless closes at the threshold of socialist consciousness, with the Japanese officials discovering the mother's hiding place and arresting her. It should be noted that this last segment of 240 words was deleted by Japanese censors before its original publication, but was partially restored in 2006. In its currently recovered extent, the excerpt reads as follows:

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The words she heard without interest and only contempt that night on the mountain now return to her mind. “You are our comrade! We can only fight the rich by joining forces!”... They did not take her salt. She thinks that if they were here now they might help her fight. No, they certainly *would* help her fight. “So it was the rich who took away my salt!” She felt a burst of rage hot as a column of fire. She stood up.²⁰

It is true that the Communists take on a more overt presence here as the force that conceptualizes the path of resistance for the mother. This ending, however, as triumphant as it may be for those seeking narrative resolution befitting Kang’s reputation as a socialist-influenced writer, also warrants a more sober reading as an arrest or standstill resulting from the submergence of the mother’s reflective subjectivity that has hitherto registered Manchukuo’s social processes. In other words, if the mother gains the beginnings of class-consciousness here, it comes at the expense of a self-awareness, the ultimate end point of which is not yet determined but open to grasping the more nuanced interrelations of race, gender, and intraethnic divisions within capitalist imperialism. But most importantly, although the Communists here arrogate to themselves the ability to resolve the mother’s problems through the resolving of class conflict, they pose a contradiction in Manchukuo, where ideological hope is commensurate with the violent destruction of personal life. In a word, Communism is the riddle that brings the story to an arrest.

That the narrative ends with an ambiguous image of a future-facing but also paralyzed subject posits the possibility that Kang is not blind to the irresolvable tension between the clear agendas of Communism and the less clear agendas of reflective subjectivity. Kang had to gauge what she could write under Japanese censorship without being completely banned from writing.²¹ These circumstances of the text’s production may have kept her from making any direct political claims that she would have otherwise made. Nevertheless, I contend that the narrative logic of *Salt* can only allow class-consciousness to be set in the future tense. The novella cannot reduce its depiction of constantly disorienting, contradictory, maddening social dynamics of Manchukuo by proposing a coherent and ready-made solution. Rather, it constructs a subject who is aware, however tenuously, that she is up against the deranging structures of the world. Kang discovers, in the effusive voice of the mother, neither a cleverly capable form of navigating peripheral modernity—like Schwarz’s Brazilian writers—nor a broken and disparaging episteme as in Krishnan’s reading of Naipaul, but

²⁰ Here I use the South Korean version recovered by Han Mansu (2006, 35–36). See Han (2006) for an account of the scientific procedures involved in the recovery, as well as a comparison between this version and North Korean rewritings of the ending.

²¹ Han emphasizes that thorough understanding of the criteria of censorship is necessary to sensitively discern what an author may have wanted to write and what he or she deemed “writeable” (2006, 45).

a discordant and resilient capacity of human thought, not unlike the way Manchukuo offered its inhabitants a precarious sense of readiness.

This article has engaged with Kang's writing of Manchukuo as a specific case of global modernity that is yet locatable in a broader, worldly literary aspiration to narrate the development of the capitalist system. Kang's Manchukuo was neither the barren hinterlands of the West and Japan, nor a dogmatically anti-imperialist or anticapitalist periphery, but a site of awakened consciousness in the face of the deranging realities of modernity's manifestations. To read *Salt* by contextualizing it in the discourse of peripheries means to understand its representation of Manchukuo as an activity of peripheral realism. As Duara states, "Open-ended, variable, and confused...Manchukuo failed to settle upon a vision of community" (2003, 79). Interpreting this historical setting through Kang's work offers a perspective of how this ambiguous space enabled a peripheral writer to find a new "community" of writing that trafficked between the global and local to create unique subjectivities very much of the world.

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