

Writing from the Uncanny Valley

An Interview by Elizabeth Hoover

IN TERMS OF GENRE, *UNBEARABLE SPLENDOR* by Sun Yung Shin is hard to pin down. It includes astute academic discourse examining Antigone through the lens of Donna Haraway's theoretical text "A Cyborg Manifesto." But it also breaks into lyric moments ("I am like one hundred electric eels. Our skin is an extravagant tongue, tasting everything . . .") or scatters lines across the page. One piece unapologetically announces itself as "a story." Writing for the *Los Angeles Review of Books*, Kathleen Rooney calls *Unbearable Splendor* "a strange and captivating hybrid."

Born in South Korea and raised by adoptive parents in Chicago, Shin uses the shifting form of *Unbearable Splendor* to explore riffs in identity. She writes, "Abandoned and then re-en-familied, re-kinned, an adoptee is many things, including, I would posit, both a form of ongoing transit and a re-territory, a re-form. This form takes on different meanings depending on the place, the language, and the people looking, listening. If our form is different, if we are no longer recognizable, if no one speaks our language, who are we?"

She mines literature, science fiction, myth, and astrophysics in her obsessive examinations of family, migration, and the significance of displaced persons, or "potential enemies as well as guests."

She is the author of two other collections of poetry: *Rough, and Savage* (Coffee House Press, 2012) and *Skirt Full of Black* (Coffee House Press, 2007). In 2016, she edited an anthology of essays, *A Good Time for the Truth: Race in Minnesota* (Minnesota Historical Society Press). She is also the editor, along with Jane Jeong Trenka and Julia Chinyere Oparah, of *Outsiders Within: Writing on Transracial Adoption* (South End Press, 2006).

She lives in Minneapolis with her husband and two daughters and teaches at Macalester College.

In this interview, conducted over the phone, we discuss her obsession with cyborgs, the allure of etymology, how she engages with genre, and what it means to be human.

ELIZABETH HOOVER You begin *Unbearable Splendor* with a long quote from Donna Haraway's "A Cyborg Manifesto" that starts, "The cyborg is resolutely committed to partially, irony, intimacy, and perversity." The other epigraph is a short line from *Blade Runner*: "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe." How are you hoping these quotes set up the book for your reader?

SUN YUNG SHIN I call the quotes epigraphs because I don't know what else to call them, but I place more emphasis on them as source texts than you do with a traditional epigraph. It's almost as if I was going to write a critical paper on "A Cyborg Manifesto" and then moved into some other strange register. In some ways, the logical conclusion of what I'm trying to do is just an annotated version of the quote. I could take the story of *Pinocchio* and annotate it with poetry and things around the side.

The other thing I am doing with the quotes is making the sources of my ideas transparent. I feel like it's more honest to include more. Lately, I have been feeling like a "more is more" person, so I want really long quotes.

EH Haraway links the cyborg to "partially," gesturing to the fact that it is a hybrid of mechanical

and human parts. The form of *Unbearable Splendor* feels cyborgian because it's a hybrid of poetry, criticism, essay, and memoir. What were your models for the form of this text?

SY When I was first starting to read poetry, I read *The Midnight* by Susan Howe. It was so intriguing how she set aside genre. It's a text I return to over and over. More and more I'm drawn to hybrid texts like that that have images, documentation, and copies of primary sources, among other things. It's a magpie methodology of picking things out of the ocean of text.

To me genres are meaningful, but it's hard for me to stick with one within a book. I get a little bored or I think that is a little monotonous for the reader. So I hope that each piece is waking up something new in an exchange with the reader.

EH Why do you find cyborgs so intriguing?

SY This doesn't make it directly into the book, but my adoptive father lost both of his legs to amputation. He wore these very expensive artificial legs. When he was wearing them, he was a cyborg. I was thinking about that and about other family members who are in wheelchairs or non-verbal or both. They are living very different physical and communicative realities. It brings me to the question: What is the limit of the human?

When do we stop recognizing people as human? The answer is different at different historical moments and in difference places. Is it because the person is Jewish? Or Queer? Or an unmarried woman? Or African? Who do we deem subhuman? Japanese ideology considers Koreans inferior, for example. Women are considered inferior to men or deviant version of men.

EH A cyborg we meet in *Unbearable Splendor* is Antigone. In "The Limit Case" you ask, "Is Antigone the original cyborg?" How is Antigone a cyborg?

SY I know! Such a good question. I became fascinated with her for many reasons. One is that she is the product of incest, but she doesn't know that until later. Her origins are obscured, like an adoptee. Also she's all wrapped up in the family, which is her reason for doing what she does. Family is her demise. She's trapped in the family. She can't get out. She has to go down into the underworld with her parents.

So how is that like a cyborg? To go back to the Haraway quote: "Unlike the hopes of Frankenstein's monster, the cyborg does not expect its father to save it through restoration of the garden . . . The cyborg would not recognize the Garden of Eden." For Antigone, there is no Garden of Eden since she's the product of incest. There is no innocence for her. She is an illegitimate offspring, like a cyborg. She creates a genealogical disruption by not marrying her cousin and refusing to have children because she dies instead.

The cyborg doesn't expect its father to save it, and Antigone has said goodbye to her father. She's determined to make this sacrifice. She's partial. She's ironic. She's intimate. She's perverse. She's certainly oppositional. She's utopian. She's a very transgressive young woman. She doesn't submit to the laws of man. She doesn't ally with her sister. She's just rough with everyone. She's a body in the wrong place, which I think of as cyborgian.

I'm really interested in her because, emotionally, I always want her to turn back. I always want her to make a different choice.

EH The idea of the uncanny is central to this book. You open with the prose poem "Valley, Uncanny" and include a diagram of the "uncanny valley," the spectrum of humanoid objects from the least life-like to the most that indicates the point at which an object is so life-like we experience a sense of eeriness and revulsion. How did you arrive at the idea of the uncanny and what is its allure for you?

SY I've been thinking about the adoptee as a cyborg. The adoptee performs childhood for strangers, and the transracial or transnational adoptee goes through a metamorphosis that can be very disturbing to the self and to other people. I was thinking about the idea of racial drag, how the adoptee of color who has a white name and a white family triggers a sense of the uncanny in a white person because that white person hasn't experienced genealogical isolation.

For Asian Americans, no matter how long we've been here, there is a constant foreignness about us. You could be fourth-generation and you'll be complimented on your English. It's sort of like "Oh this dog is walking on two legs, how strange." It just reveals what we, as nation, construct as American and what we construct as permanently foreign.

EH You present the diagram with the uncanny valley, which charts the uncanniness of various liminal beings like the humanoid robot and the zombie along an x and y axis. On the following page, you write, "I lost my name and stepped into this corner, this half frame, the axis." Under that is an x and y axis, but the chart isn't populated. It's blank.

SY I was trying to explore the lie of the child as blank canvas. As an adoptee, my name and particular history were erased, but I wasn't *tabula rasa* ready to be rewritten like a floppy disc. The empty diagram is almost like clock hands frozen in time or the corner of a room. I hope it is evocative of different frameworks and different options.

EH In this book, you investigate individual words, examining their definitions and etymologies, but also how they sound and how your mouth moves when you say them out loud. At one point you describe what happens when you type "adoptees" into Microsoft Word. It's "underlined in little red Vs that look like the stitching that ran across some of my dresses when we were younger." Where does your interest in words as objects, particularly as historical objects, come from?

SY I am influenced by my childhood. I played piano. I did ballet. I was in choirs. I was a spelling bee geek. All of those things teach you about rhythm, sound, pitch, and duration. With choirs and with spelling bees, you have to get really granular about how things are pronounced and the relationship of sound to meaning. From ballet and piano, I learned French and Italian. My maternal grandmother spoke Polish. My dad's German-Irish and used German slang. I took a lot of language classes and was always interested in American Sign Language. Just through study-

ing literature and words, I started learning Latin, Greek, and Anglo-Saxon. English is such a capacious language that absorbs every other language. It is so fascinating that each word has its own history as if it has evolved the way a species evolves. Etymologies are a way of trying to understand. Each word contains so much civilization. Each word migrated, picked up meanings, and left some meanings behind. If a word was a person and you wanted to get to know that person, you'd want to know their past, how they got here.

EH You enact how a word's meaning can change on a micro-level. As you repeat words, you use them in new ways. For example, you write, "A valley makes a kind of hole." This is a meaning the reader is familiar with: a hole is an empty space. A few pages later, you write, "I spent sixteen years living with American parents. / They are inside me now, they are my guests. / They are my holes, like babies, like stones." Now *hole* means something different, it suggests a presence.

sys I am always risking and falling into excessive mixed metaphors, but to me a hole is all those things. A hole is abjection, disappearance, death, caves, and graves. Depending on the point of view, a drawing of a hole could look like a stone. Also, women are associated with our orifices and our bodily integrity. Women are associated with our inability as a gender worldwide to defend and fend off lifelong violations of our bodies.

In my work, I take images or words and start riffing off of them. I think, can I exhaust this image? How many meanings can this image or thing yield up to me? Some words like *adoptee* carry a lot of shame. I can feel like a victim to a word like that. It feels good to address it directly because it takes away some of the power of the word to shame me. This word exists in me like some kind of sharp object. I ask, what if I take it apart or befriend it with curiosity?

EH Why does the word *adoptee* carry shame with it?

sys Korean adoptees are the direct result of the U.S. involvement in Korea. The first adoptees were mixed-raced offspring of American GIs and Korean women. Many of these women were sex workers. They were called "dust of the streets" and were unacceptable in Korean society. Korean adoptees were the result of a purge by a society that wouldn't support single mothers and wouldn't support mixed-raced children. They needed to get rid of us in order to uphold an ideal of the Korean family as headed by a man and ethnically pure. On the other hand, Korean prostitutes were encouraged by the government during the war because American GIs brought in American currency. Korean sex workers were considered patriots, but also very oppressed by both the U.S. and the Korean government, which were exploiting them to keep the American soldiers entertained and comforted.

Up until recently it was a shameful secret in South Korea, but it has come out that many of us were kidnaped or went through a child laundering process to be made available for western consumption. There was good money in American adoptions.

EH In *Unbearable Splendor*, you include a copy of your hojuk. Can you explain what that document is?

sys In Korea, when someone is born, they are added to their family registry or hojuk. Some registries go back hundreds of years. When someone is born and abandoned, they still have to register, but they are the only one on that registry. The hojuk I include in the book is actually my

own, and it states I am the chief of the Shin family. But the Shin family is just one person. It's just a very strange sort of paper. It establishes a family of one. It is an orphan hojuk.

EH You often use the first-person collective. For example, you write "Perhaps our father and mother were people from the north, refugees to the south . . . Perhaps they were married but we were the fourth child, one too many." Does this use of the first-person collective relate to the hojuk and the idea of being a family of one?

sys I was thinking about the idea of multiple selves. I left my Korean self—whoever the person was going to be and whatever that person was named—in Korea, but that person also lives inside me like a ghost or a haunting. Also my story is very similar to the other 200,000 Korean children who were removed from Korea. I was trying to communicate that this isn't about me as an individual. This is about our collective condition, our collective trauma.

EH Your use of the prose-poem makes *Unbearable Splendor* formally very different from your earlier book *Rough, and Savage*. How did your approach to the page change between these two books?

sys It doesn't totally make sense to me, but I've been having trouble using line breaks. They feel fake. When I read other people's poetry, I don't feel that way. But when I use them myself they feel really dramatic, like I'm announcing that I am making a double-entendre or pausing for effect. When I started writing *Unbearable Splendor*, I tried using line breaks but there wasn't enough drama in the line to justify them. There weren't enough phrases that I wanted to isolate on the line. I kept coming back to the rush and breathlessness of prose. There's a lot of manic energy in this book. The narrator is someone who is frantic. Well, the narrator is just me. I'm a frantic person.

The slowness of shorter lines felt overly precious for the kind of angry and weird propositions I was making. I just didn't have enough prettiness or lush lyricism because it wasn't serving my project of thinking through theoretical ideas about monstrosity, hospitality, calamity, loneliness, and sacrifices.

EH Both *Unbearable Splendor* and *Rough, and Savage* have a sense that they are projects bound to fail. In *Unbearable Splendor* you write, "We think that if we keep trying to get closer and closer to those non-memories that we can go back in time and change the course of events." This is, of course, not possible. In *Rough, and Savage* the narrator seems to be trying to recover a Korea that doesn't exist anymore. How is failure part of your work?

sys Lots of individual things fail, and I throw them away. But in terms of trying to create some kind of unified theory of poetry that is enacted in the book: it's never going to be seen, even far away on the horizon. I feel a yearning for perfection and utopia in the text. I yearn for a total wholeness, however that might look, although I know I will never achieve it. I'm sure that it's related to the ambiguous loss of not having my Korean family and going through my life—most certainly ending my life—not knowing where I come from family-wise.

EH When I reviewed *Rough, and Savage* for the Minneapolis *Star-Tribune*, I used the word "fragment" to describe the syntax of the book. This word feels very unsatisfying and maybe even inaccurate because fragments are part of a whole. If you recovered all of the fragments of something,

you could put it back together. I don't get a sense that there is a recoverable whole that you were working towards or away from.

sys I used to feel really defensive about the word "fragment." It seemed reductive, but I don't mind it any more. However, I also think that "fragment" doesn't really say it all. The idea of wholeness is so colonized by patriarchal ideas that don't help us think about language in new ways.

I use the sentence fragment to bring up questions: What is language actually for? What is the sentence for? What is the narrative of cause and effect for? And what things aren't they for? I also want to open up space for the reader so the poem is more of a dance between the reader and writer, not a solid performance from beginning to end. That is not to say because something is conventionally complete the audience is passive, but I want to create more spaces to make new things in—things we need but don't even know exist yet.

EH I also think using the word *fragment* discounts the white space. Instead of thinking of a poem as fragments, what if it's a project made up of text and white space? What if the white space is as significant as the text?

sys If the whole piece is a piece of music, then each "fragment" is a musical phrase or even just one note. I think of the white spaces as time, as different moments of caesuras. Time is musically meaningful and durationally meaningful, therefore the white space is meaningful. Or the fragments could be fish in the sea. There's water and there's fish. Each fish isn't a fragment of the school; they are something more alive. They are not broken.

EH I think *fragment* is a kind of shorthand term rather than a substantial way to describe a text. The word *experimental* feels like that to me, as well. I wonder if it's even a useful category.

sys What does that mean anymore? A lot of the so-called experimental techniques have been embraced by more mainstream lyric or narrative poets, which I think is awesome. So I don't feel tied to any particular category or mode of writing. When I describe my work, I say "experimental, for lack of a better word." I think my work in *Unbearable Splendor* isn't that formally experimental. It's recognizably prose-poetry or essays. But it can feel experimental to some readers because it's disorienting. Some of that disorientation is a lack of understanding about the cultural or historical context. Sometimes readers might find my work dense or confusing. But I don't think it's confusing. I am always more worried about being too obvious. I'm always worried that what I write is really plain or obvious. I'm not trying to be obscure. I'm trying to find some authentic expression that brings together the intellectual and the emotional.

I'm questing and searching for new visions. I want to write in a different or new way, a way that doesn't feel like a cover-up. I don't want to write something that says, "Let's just cover up the flaws, the holes, the breaks, the things that don't make sense, so that we can consume it and move on with our day." I hope to let the text be porous the way our own psyches are a porous text. ◀

ELIZABETH HOOVER's poetry has appeared in *Epoch*, the *Crab Orchard Review*, and *The Awl*, among others. She received the 2017 *Boulevard* Emerging Poets prize, the 2015 *Difficult Fruit* Poetry Prize from *IthacaLit*, and the 2014 *StoryQuarterly* essay prize. Her book reviews and criticism have appeared in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, the *Dallas Morning News*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and *Prairie Schooner*. You can see more of her work at ehooverink.com.

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