
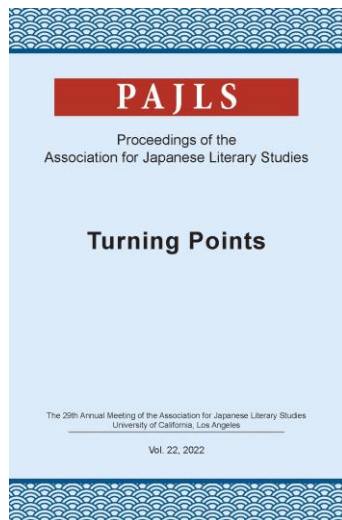


“Reclaimed Landscape: The Figure of the *Chōsen Buraku* in Postwar and Zainichi Literature”

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**RECLAIMED LANDSCAPE: THE FIGURE OF THE *CHŌSEN*
BURAKU IN POSTWAR AND ZAINICHI LITERATURE**

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This essay considers literary depictions of Japan's postwar landscape as a "turning point" in both temporal and spatial terms. I think through the racialized logic of the postwar city as a wasteland in Kaikō Takeshi (Kaikō Ken, 1930–1989)'s *Nihon sanmon opera*, where the ruins of the Osaka Arsenal are presented as a site that symbolizes the irreversibly transformative violence of the last days of the Japanese Empire. At the same time, Kaikō suggests that this space holds the potential for future, radically productive transformations enacted by those who continue to be abjected by the postwar state. In the second half of the paper, I analyze the figure of reclaimed land in Kim Talsu (1919–1997)'s short story "Son Yōnggam" as a rhetorical gesture that positions the ethnically Korean urban enclave at the center of Japan's postwar processes of geopolitical reconfiguration and existential disorientation. In doing so, I hope not only to consider the significance of the Korean *buraku* as an image that appears repeatedly in postwar literature by Japanese and Zainichi Korean authors, but also to demonstrate how different approaches to representing such racialized spaces in literature yield historical narratives with very different messages about the aftermaths and afterlives of war and empire.

Kaikō Ken's long-form novel *Nihon sanmon opera* (Japan's Threepenny Opera) prominently features the imagery of the postwar city as a ruins.² First serialized in *Bungakukai* in 1959, the novel also serves as one of the most well-known representations of the ethnically Korean *buraku* in postwar Japanese literature. The plot consists of Kaikō's fictionalized version of actual events covered closely by the news media in Osaka in 1957 and 1958. It follows a multiethnic, mostly Korean community eventually dubbed "the Apache tribe" by local newspapers, living in a shantytown across a canal from the ruins of the Osaka Arsenal, which was once one of Asia's largest munitions factories before it was obliterated by a U.S. air raid on August 14, 1945, one day before the official end of the Japanese empire. The so-called "Apache," described by Kaikō as a band of vagrants, ex-cons, and illegal immigrants living under

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² Kaikō Takeshi, "Nihon sanmon opera," in *Kaikō Takeshi zenshū* vol. 2 (Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1992).

aliases and completely off the radar of the government, spend their days sleeping, drinking bootleg *makkōlli* and eating *horumon'yaki*, and at night sneak into the grounds of the Osaka Arsenal ruins to dig up scrap metal for sale on the black market. Their endeavor is enabled by the Japanese and Osaka governments' initial refusal to deal with the wreckage: a large swath of rubble, mechanical detritus, and even human remains, positioned right next to the grounds of Osaka castle and serving as a harsh reminder of the disastrous Empire and its aftermath.

Kaikō's descriptions of the arsenal ruins are surprisingly lush, framing the laboring of the scrap metal thieves as an insistence on the possibility of life under seemingly impossible conditions, an assertion matched by a flowering of the landscape that seems to defy both its historical and geographical context as a disaster zone in the center of urban Osaka. This is perhaps most apparent as the protagonist Fukusuke, on a trial run to join the "Apache tribe" without fully understanding the details of the job, seeks to orient himself within the landscape as he runs to keep up with his companions:

He tried shining his flashlight. When he did, what up until this moment he had thought must surely be bamboo was suddenly *susuki* grass. Fukusuke let his hands hang in amazement. He couldn't comprehend how far the thicket of *susuki* continued. The echoes of the train's wheels trembled, sending long reverberations through the giant, dark hollow of land and sky, and every sound in the area died. At a site less than five minutes from Osaka station by train, in the heart of Japan's second largest city, was vacant land growing this savage vegetation. Fukusuke tried vaguely to imagine the vastness of the area from the hollowness of the train's echoes, the strength of the grass, the sandy taste of the wind blowing in. The wind contained no scent or taste, no sign whatsoever of the city.³

This brief glimpse of wilderness is swiftly interrupted by his compatriots, who are worried about the flashlight attracting the attention of police, and it is only after Fukusuke completes the exhausting physical labor of carrying recently dug-up scrap metal to the edge of the ruins that the identity of this landscape is definitively revealed:

Fukusuke staggered to his feet to try to catch his breath, but it was

³ Kaikō, 263–264.

only then that he was finally able to see the full view of the wasteland where he had continued his gloomy struggle. Beyond the savage *susuki* extended a red forest of steel beams. His whole field of view was overgrown with weeds, broken chimneys, brick walls, holes, chasms, mounds, and concrete fangs, and the night was softly stirring as though trying to leave the gray fog behind. Fukusuke's breath was taken away by that vast wasteland.⁴

Kaikō's descriptions of the wasteland make a point of blending the urban and industrial with imagery of the natural world: first with the cognitive dissonance of the sound of the nearby train mixing with a wind that bears no hint of the urban surroundings, and then through the metaphors of the "red forest of steel beams" and "concrete fangs" mixed in with the vegetation of the wasteland, which is repeatedly described as "savage" (*dōmō*). He uses the verb *ōitsukusu* (蔽い尽くす, often associated with plant life and here translated as "overgrowth") to refer not only to the wasteland's weeds but to the metal and concrete detritus of the munitions factory and the scars left behind in the earth by the firebombing, thereby conveying a sense of rampant growth among the wreckage.

This idea of the ruins as a site of uncontrolled and uncontrollable growth is reinforced by the novel's depiction of the *chōsen buraku* that has sprung up across the canal from the wasteland, which creates a similar sense of a space existing both within and outside of its urban surroundings through the mixed imagery of organic life and inorganic waste. The village itself is variously described as "like moss"⁵ and "like a farm village,"⁶ and the initial description of the space emphasizes the total lack of boundaries between indoors and outdoors, or between bodies, buildings, and landscape.

It was not a very big village. But its shacks clung together, clustered together, melted together in the night, and it was hard to distinguish walls from doors to the extent that you couldn't tell one from the other in the darkness. They were a stubborn rash. Just when you thought that the road like a tattered old sash had split off randomly it came together, and just when you thought it had come together it parted. From the way pigs and chickens casually ran into the homes while crying out in raucous voices,

⁴ Kaikō, 269.

⁵ Kaikō, 274.

⁶ Kaikō, 255.

you could clearly see the signs that humans were living intimately with them without bothering to build floors. Each house looked as though if a man were to suddenly crash into it, it would easily collapse without even the resistance of a matchstick. On roofs, shards of slate and broken corrugated sheet iron were lined up and weighed down with plenty of rocks so as not to blow away in the wind, but judging from the unreliability of the houses themselves, the rocks that were supposed to be there as protection had actually become the greatest threat, and seemed to be stubbornly aimed at the heads of sleeping humans. A strange stench of acid and mucus arose from the doors and walls, making you wonder how deeply into the soil the sweat and piss of the *buraku* residents had permeated. In these tumor-like houses and throughout the surrounding darkness, you could hear the cries of babies, mutters of the elderly, shrieks of women, and the laughter of men, giving off a certain wildness. As Fukusuke walked along, he saw a crowd of children who looked entirely as though someone had attached lungs and a throat to a mass of trash, flitting around the sheds like bats, as well as an almost completely naked man collapsed in the middle of the street. The man was drunk out of his mind, sprawling out blackened like clay, emitting a smell from his whole body that was immediately recognizable, a rainbow *kimchi* and *makkōlli*.⁷

Much like the imagery of the Osaka arsenal ruins, there is an emphasis here on the scattered detritus and the physical precarity of a landscape on the verge of collapse, in descriptions of houses that melt into each other, and roofs cobbled together with scraps of metal and slate that are constantly in danger of blowing away. And yet the overall impression is not one of tenuous existence, but of fecund and untamable life. This is conveyed through the bodily metaphors used to describe the landscape—a neighborhood like “a stubborn rash,” a road like “a tattered sash,” doors and walls that emit “a strange stench of acid and mucus,” and “tumor-like houses”—as well as the likening of physical bodies of the villagers to inorganic waste: “a crowd of children who looked entirely as though someone had attached lungs and a throat to a mass of trash,” and the naked man’s blackened, clay-like skin.

It is worth noting here that other scholars such as Park Yuha have rightly criticized the way Kaikō’s descriptions of ethnicity and ethnically-

⁷ Kaikō, 256.

marked space in this novel draw on tired and racist stereotypes to convey a sense of “Koreanness” to his audience.⁸ The imagery of dirtiness and drunkenness we see here, as well as the fixation on the naked man’s dark skin and the smell of *kimchi* and *makkōlli*, is echoed elsewhere in the novel in clearly problematic descriptions of bodies that have “child-bearing hips” or smell of garlic.⁹ We can and should criticize the clear limitations of Kaikō’s ability to imagine ethnic otherness from his position as an elite intellectual and recent Akutagawa prize winner at the time he wrote this novel. However, I would also argue that we can and should engage with the larger project of *Nihon sanmon opera*, which is not really about “Koreanness” at all—something Andrew Harding has also pointed out in his analysis of the novel’s evocations of “indigeneity” in portraying the so-called “Japanese Apache.”¹⁰ Rather, as the novel progresses and the community of thieves expands, Kaikō’s gestures at markers of Korean identity within the *buraku* come to serve as signals of a broader multiculturalism that becomes the basis of a utopian society in which Japanese, Korean, and Okinawan misfits come together without knowing each other’s “real” identity, and everyone is equally compensated for work according to their ability, including children, women, the elderly, and the disabled, all of whom are shown to play crucial roles in the unearthing and selling of scrap metal on the black market. As the novel progresses, we come to understand the lush, expansive field of *susuki* grass in the initial scene of the ruins as a clear metaphor for the novel’s cast of ethnic others, whose unbridled wildness and stubborn insistence on remaining vividly and improbably alive under inhospitable living conditions make them uniquely able to transform the wreckage of the wasteland into a source of sustenance.¹¹ If this all sounds uncomfortably close to our current day’s

⁸ Park Yuha, “Kyōbō suru hyōshō: Kaikō Takeshi / Komatsu Sakyō / Yan Sogiru no ‘Apache’ shōsetsu o megutte,” *Nihon bungaku* 55, no. 11 (2006): 35–47.

⁹ Kaikō, “Nihon sanmon opera,” 15.

¹⁰ Andrew Harding, “The Figure of Zainichi: Korean Resident Fiction and Post-Imperial Subjectivity in Japan” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 2021), 143–163.

¹¹ Thank you to Jon Pitt for pointing out that while *susuki* appears frequently in premodern literature as a traditional symbol of autumn, Ito Hiroshi has sought to complicate its simple association with “Japaneseness” by emphasizing the plant’s status as an invasive plant, especially in relation to (and competition with) the related species of pampas grass found in America. For example, she observes *susuki* in Japan both overtaking other plant species and being “conquered” itself by pampas grass, writing, “this is how invasive species take off and come to invade another territory.” The notion of *susuki* as a “conquering” invasive species within Japan potentially provides an additional layer of nuance to my reading here of the so-called “Apache tribe” as a community that comes to “occupy” the space of the

neoliberal logic of the melting pot, it's with good reason, and yet we can nevertheless see in *Nihon sanmon opera* Kaikō's earnest desire to push the limits of our understanding of race and space in his attempt to transform the racialized wreckage of the empire into a site of resistance with the potential to exceed or avoid the regulatory power of the state.

I turn now to a very different approach to the literary production of ethnically marked space in postwar literature, in the figure of reclaimed land as a trope that shows up throughout literature by Zainichi Korean authors.¹² An early example of a literary portrayal of the *Chōsen buraku* as reclaimed land appears in Kim Talsu's short story "Son Yōnggam" (Old Man Son), which appeared in *Shin Nihon Bungaku* in 1951.¹³ Like *Nihon sanmon opera*, "Son Yōnggam" is preoccupied with the violent transformation of urban space in postwar Japan. However, if Kaikō Takeshi's attempts at representing racialized or ethnicized space ultimately ends at the level of the metaphor, Kim Talsu's work consistently foregrounds the historical and material relationship between body and land.

"Son Yōnggam" tells the story of the death of the titular character, an elderly Korean man who relocates from Hiratsuka to the anonymized Korean *buraku* N after losing his wife and grandchild in a firebombing at the end of World War II. In *buraku* N, Son becomes involved in local political activism, only to be killed in a hit-and-run by a military truck transporting munitions for use in the Korean War as village N is taken over by the remilitarization effort. His death, foreshadowed at the beginning of the story and portrayed in its final pages, is an ambiguously framed demise that might be interpreted as either an accident or a suicide. However, despite his obvious centrality, the name of Son Yōnggam (or for that matter, any other character) isn't given until almost a third of the way through the short story.

Instead, the narrative starts by presenting a threefold history of *buraku* N, starting with a detailed description of the land itself, which was

arsenal ruins. See Ito Hiromi, *Tree Spirits Grass Spirits*, trans. Jon L. Pitt (New York: Nightboat Books, 2023), 76–77.

¹² In literary depictions of Ikaino, the neighborhood of Osaka that was and remains Japan's largest Koreatown, the land itself is frequently depicted as land reclaimed from marshland through the labor of Korean immigrants under conditions of empire. For a full discussion of the literary trope of reclaimed land in Zainichi Korean literature, see Chapter 1 of Julia Hansell Clark, "Reclaiming Landscape: Place and Personhood in the Literature of Ikaino," PhD. diss. (University of California, Los Angeles, 2023).

¹³ Kim Talsu, "Son Yōnggam," in *Kim Talsu shōsetsu zenshū* vol. 2 (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1980), 34–46.

reclaimed from Tokyo Bay during the empire. The second portion takes us through the history of wartime, the immediate postwar, and the beginning of the Korean war in terms of the movement of people and machines through the landscape, starting with the statement “For over a decade, the *buraku* remained nothing more than a collection of low, old galvanized iron roofs, but people’s lives changed quite a bit. Glimpsed at dusk, the vast concrete of the thoroughfare sprawled out ahead as white as ever, but what was coming back and forth on top of it changed quite a bit.”¹⁴ We then get a description of the main road’s original use by the Imperial Japanese Navy to transport weapons to the bay, the witnessing of the end of the war by chain gangs of the navy prison forced to work along the roadside, the postwar appearance of civilian passenger cars moving through at high speeds, the initial appearance of military trucks leaving the corpses of recklessly struck pedestrians in their wake, and finally the arrival of an endless procession of droning, slow-moving armored vehicles carrying bombs for use in the Korean War. The third and final portion of this opening section describes the changing occupations of the inhabitants of *buraku* N, starting back at the beginning with the statement, “The people of the *buraku*, who were wrung out of the farming villages of their home country Chosŏn, and brought as low-wage laborers for the land reclamation project of the naval unit, started out in this way as construction workers.”¹⁵ The narrative traces how the end of construction work caused the main industry of the *buraku* to shift to scrap collecting and pig farming, followed by the rise of food services and bootlegged liquor for sale on the black market in the postwar period. It is only at this point that the character of Son Yŏnggam, mentioned without context in the first paragraph, is introduced simply as “one of the newcomers” to the *buraku*, setting us up to understand him first and foremost as one instance of an ordinary life lived out within the true “main character” of the village itself.

The striking opening paragraphs of the story describe the formation of the land itself, immediately tying the people of the *buraku* to the materiality of the land, and the land to the history of Japanese imperialism:

That trunk road went alongside the sea, travelling from the eastern edge of Y city, stretching through R, which by the time of the war had already been annexed as part of the expansion of the navy port, and on towards H harbor, which apparently had once been a fishing village.

¹⁴ Kim, 34.

¹⁵ Kim, 36.

By the way, at the three-way split where the trunk road heading toward R suddenly splits off to the right towards H lies village N, one of the Korean *buraku* in Y city, with its low eaves clustered together. The village has quite an old history. And just as one cannot possibly think of Son Yōnggam's death apart from the trunk road, it is also impossible to think about the history of the people of this village separate from that road. Which is to say, it was these very people who created the road to begin with.

This land, including the area where the village is, used to be ocean in Tokyo Bay. People employed by a naval unit came and filled it in, and since the reclamation project included new roads connected to the trunk road and even breakwaters, they built living quarters and a village and ended up just staying there. A bit north of village N there is another place called village M, but it was built under the same circumstances.¹⁶

This opening passage gives us a great deal of insight into the view of history conveyed throughout the rest of the story, one that involves continuous interplay between the idea of historical fatedness or causality and the infuriating incomprehensibility of sheer bad luck. The narrator, who seems to start his exposition in mid-thought with the phrase “that trunk road” (*sono kansen dōro*), states outright that the long history of the village can't be separated from the village residents' involvement in constructing the lands they live on and the roads they travel (and, in Son's case, are killed) on, and yet the grammatical structure of the passage continuously asserts both the utter lack of agency and fundamental arbitrariness of this community. The vague passive statement “people were hired” (*hitobito ga yatowarete*) is later echoed in the even more pointed passive-tense description quoted above, of the *buraku* residents being “wrung out of their homeland (*oshishiboridasarete*) and brought (*tsureraretekita*)” to the area, implying that their immigration was not a choice made freely but rather imposed upon them under conditions of limited agency. The fact that they stayed to form a permanent settlement is presented similarly as a decision made by outside circumstances in the sentence ending, “they ended up just staying there (*sono mama soko ni itsuite shimatta no de aru*).” Moreover, by starting the second sentence with the casual “by the way” (*tokorode*), and going on to say there is

¹⁶ Kim, 34.

another nearby village called *buraku* M built under the exact same circumstances, the reader gets the impression that there is nothing particularly special about the *buraku* N of this story, but rather that similarly precarious communities of immigrant laborers might be forming throughout the area, or even throughout the nation.

Through the specific figuration of the Korean *buraku* as reclaimed land, a circular logic of ethnically marked space in postwar Japan begins to emerge: the land itself exists because Koreans were brought there to build it, and the Korean community exists because the newly reclaimed land was there to shelter them. The struggle of the villagers to conceptualize their current “home” as complicit in the destruction of their “homeland” is embodied in the very space they occupy, since they are living on land that they constructed with their own hands as laborers working within the imperial state. These contradictions inherent in the Korean *buraku*—a home away from home that was built through the very imperial system of expansion that destroyed their homeland to begin with, and a community forced to witness the further destruction of that homeland through the remilitarization enabled by the very roads they had no choice but to build—highlight the bleak conditions of life for a community materially bound to a space that was built on their own suffering.

The next part of the passage further reinforces this sense of *buraku* N as an impossible space, inconceivable within the regulatory system of the Japanese state beyond the service they have provided as disposable labor. This is communicated through the use of the blunt label “reclamation *buraku*” rather than a proper address or place name:

Because there had been no land rental or anything else here until a few years before, it had no official address and letters would simply be addressed to the “reclamation *buraku* of Y city.” As a result, when the children who grew up in the *buraku* had to give their address to their friends or teachers, how small they must have felt.¹⁷

The liminal status of the *buraku* is indelibly written into the villagers’ daily lived experience through the village’s lack of a postal code, requiring that the residents constantly identify themselves as people coming from a constructed, segregated land on the outskirts of the city. The villagers live in a place that used to be literally nowhere, and its current existence is not fully legible or visible to the state. Kim’s insistence on providing overly

¹⁷ Kim, 34.

detailed information about the layout of the land without actually giving any identifying place names beyond initials such as N and M emphasizes this paradoxical sense of a Korean *buraku* that is at once both real and fabricated.

The precarious poetics of space established by Kim at the outset of “Son Yōnggam” enables a sense of temporal and physical instability, allowing the narrative to fold back in on itself in presenting parallel accounts of the wartime firebombings, the experiences of Zainichi Koreans in the immediate postwar, and the sense of dread that accompanies the endless parade of armored trucks that mark the beginning of the Korean War. This allows Kim to portray the space of the *buraku* as simultaneously serving conflicting roles in the lives of its residents: the late 1940s storyline explains how the local political organization Chōren (which embraces members both young and old, men and women, as Kim goes out of his way to point out) brings new life to the *buraku* as a space of resistance that extends beyond the organization’s forced disbandment in 1949, and yet the work as a whole refuses any simple narrative of political empowerment. The ultimate inescapability of the system of war is symbolized by the continuously referenced droning of the armored trucks moving through the village, constantly drawing the villagers back into an awareness of their unwilling complicity in the continuous destruction of their homeland: “Now, the parade of trucks continuously commanded their view. Because now, after the things piled on those trucks passed through H harbor, they knew exactly where they would be carried and why.”¹⁸

It is this droning of the military trucks that ultimately drives Son mad from sleeplessness and sends him out into the middle of the road at night to a death that remains illegible both to the other villagers and to the reader. At this point, the narrative ultimately refuses any sort of metaphorical interpretation, instead representing Son’s inner life as a fragmented whirlwind of visceral memories and historical events: “Bombs dropped swiftly, smoothly in a line from a plane like the shit of some kind of bird. The thundering explosions as they touch the ground! Ah, people, humans are blown to bits and blasted into the air. Grandson’s smoldering chunk of arm. Wife’s charred, unrecognizable torso. The parade of trucks. The glaring face of Yi Sanggil being hauled off in handcuffs.”¹⁹ And later: “The Kabo Revolution. The Ŭlsa Treaty. The unforgettable annexation of Korea on August 29. The complete abandonment of education after that.

¹⁸ Kim, 36.

¹⁹ Kim, 43.

The 3/1 Independence Uprising. Jail. Wandering through the country. Finally, the Kampo Ferry abroad, to Japan. People... War. The sound of air-raid sirens. Explosions, a sea of fire. People... August 15, 1945. Korea's independence, complete independence! The People's Republic, purged of traitors. The liberation of the land. That is..., that is..."²⁰ Son Yōnggam's death at the end of the novel leaves us with these fragments, which refuse to be pieced together into a historical narrative with any clarity beyond the sheer bad luck of one man experiencing it all, and the villagers' confusion when Son's corpse is discovered with a freshly shaved beard. Did he go out to resist? Did he go out to die? Under the circumstances, is there any difference?

While both *Nihon sanmon opera* and "Son Yōnggam" portray the rise and ultimate disintegration of a postwar Korean *buraku*, the two works demonstrate the wide range of ways in which the material space of the *buraku* has been claimed and reclaimed within literature as a method for grappling with contested memories of war and its aftermath. While Kaikō Takeshi sought to portray the radical potential of a *buraku* sustained by scrap metal stolen from the ruins of the Osaka Arsenal to critique the continuities of empire in the postwar period, the figure of the *buraku* as reclaimed land in "Son Yōnggam" seems to defy such easy summary in its ambivalence toward the very concept of resistance. In lieu of a definitive conclusion, I would like to suggest that we might understand this vision of the Korean *buraku* as reclaimed land in terms of Édouard Glissant's concept of the "poetics of landscape," in which "the relationship with the land, one that is even more threatened because the community is alienated from the land, becomes so fundamental in this discourse that landscape in the work stops being merely decorative or supportive and emerges as a full character. Describing the landscape is not enough. The individual, the community, the land are inextricable in the process of creating history."²¹ By portraying the *buraku* as a space constantly in the process of production and reproduction, a site of complex entanglement of personal memory and historical narratives without a satisfying conclusion, Kim both insists on the importance of the *buraku* as a material space and hints at the potential for the figurative reclamation of this space through literature.

²⁰ Kim, 43–44.

²¹ Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 105.