An Ambivalent Gaze at North Koreans in Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang*

I. North Korea, Graphic Travelogue, Otherness

Guy Delisle's *Pyongyang: A Journey in North Korea* (2003) records his daily observations and experiences in the capital city of North Korea, where he stayed for two months in 2001 to supervise the production of an outsourced French animated film.[1] *Pyongyang* has been critically acclaimed, as is demonstrated by a list of forty-three international reviews inside the book, but its topic alone is compelling enough to deserve wider attention. The travelogue is about North Korea, a territory of "others" that has not opened its doors to the world like "normal" nations.[2] As David Shim notes, North Korea has been represented as "a timeless 'mystery,'" an "enigma," "terra incognita," and a kind of "blackhole" (1-3). Yet these representations do not mean that the outside world has no inkling of the nation at all. North Korea is known for its totalitarianism, centralized economy, human rights violations, and its development of nuclear programs. These characteristics are not particular to North Korea alone, but lack of access to the nation means that North Korean lives remain mysterious to the outside world. Since North Korea seems inaccessible and travel to the nation unusual, *Pyongyang* demands critical scrutiny. Delisle's text produces ambivalent effects, as colonial writings about non-Western regions have often historically demonstrated. Writing from a position of privilege, Delisle has the opportunity to extend knowledge of North Korea to Western readers. However, his text runs the risk of merely legitimizing Western presuppositions about North Koreans.

Pyongyang is not just a travelogue of a "strange" land. It is "the first graphic novel of North Korea in English (or in its original language, French)" (Armstrong 366).[3] To retell his past experience with dramatic effect, Delisle presents the protagonist in his own image, whom North Koreans call "Mister Guy," and depicts him grappling with local people and their culture in the panels. *Pyongyang* allows Delisle to visually represent the interior spaces of a city that he was not allowed to photograph or film during his stay. *Pyongyang* features visual tropes that are predictable and familiar as they depict North Koreans as eccentric, impoverished, and indoctrinated, if not brainwashed. In "(Dis)Orienting North Korea," Suzy

Kim writes that despite the wide influence of Edward Said and postcolonial critique, "places like North Korea continue to be refracted through the Orientalist lens in the West today" (481). Nevertheless, *Pyongyang* is not another text that simply reinforces stereotypes about North Korea. Although Deslisle's protagonist, Mister Guy, searches for and reaffirms the "otherness" of North Koreans, a close reading of *Pyongyang* calls into question the legitimacy of this affirmation.

The meaning of otherness and the way it highlights certain qualities of particular people cannot be discussed without considering power relations. In Jean-François Staszak's definition,

> [o]therness is the result of a discursive process by which a dominant in-group ("Us," the Self) constructs one or many dominated out-groups ("Them," the Other) by stigmatizing a difference—real or imagined—presented as a negation of identity and thus a motive for potential discrimination. (43)

Otherness has been recontextualized, redefined, and reconstructed to identify who "we" are. Let me give two examples. In his discussion about Europe as an idea, an identity, and a geopolitical reality, Gerard Delanty pays attention to the way that "[identities] are constructed against a category of otherness" (5). The "we" is identified not by what "we" share or experience in common but rather "through the imposition of otherness in the formation of a binary typology of 'Us' and 'Them.' The purity and stability of the 'We' is guaranteed first in the naming, then in the demonisation and finally in the cleansing of otherness" (5). In this process, otherness is categorized as either "recognition" or "negation" based on whether or not it works for "self-identity"; otherness can be accepted when others are not regarded as "threatening stranger[s]," but if they are, their otherness will be excluded (5). Delanty's analysis overlaps with Sara Ahmed's view of how difference is treated in the construction of national identity. Taking the United Kingdom as a case study, Ahmed argues that the multicultural nation uses two types of others to present its ideal image "as 'being' plural, open and diverse; as being loving and welcoming to others" (133). On the one hand, some others "'give' their difference to the nation, by mixing with others" (139), thus assisting the nation to "[construct] itself as ideal in its capacity to assimilate others into itself" (137); on the other hand, other others who fail to do so "become the sign of disturbance" (139) that presents "this national ideal . . . as all the more

ideal" (137). Under these circumstances, the status of incoming others is determined by whether they "meet 'our' conditions" to love the nation as "an ideal object" (135).

Although Delanty and Ahmed focus on different geopolitical contexts, they both recognize that othering particular people, especially those who are inferior in power, involves defining "us" as *un*-othered at the expense of the complexity of diverse social relations. The dualism founded on a simplified "us" and "them" is detected in the Cold War construction of "North Korea as a problem of security and a failed state" (Choi 2). As Shine Choi explains,

> North Korea is a product of encounters between various "us's" and various "North Koreas", but this various, diverse, fragmented, ambiguous "us" remains a particular "us" on one side of politics along the line reified by the Cold War binaries of (neo)liberal US–Western Europe versus the communist-socialist Soviet bloc. (2)

During the Cold War, the United States pursued a "policy of 'containing' the Soviet system" (*NSC*). Paraphrasing the Americanist Donald Pease, Alan Nadel notes how "American cold war foreign policy is marked by a complex narrative of Other and Same" (14). Consequently, North Korea, aligned with the Soviet Union, was predictably othered in the West during the Cold War. But the Western representation of North Korea as "them" persists even in the post-Cold War era geopolitically and culturally. The image of North Korea is thus not simply a Cold War legacy but an ongoing cultural issue that, as Choi argues, leads to the discussion of "how a particular position (e.g. the culture, subjectivity, perspective of the 'self') gets privileged and how the figure of the 'Other' operates in these cases" (3).

Given the above examples of how to treat otherness in different contexts and the historical status of North Korea, Mister Guy's view of the North Koreans expresses a desire to adhere to the historical division between "us" and "them" rather than an attempt to view the local people from a new perspective. As a result, *Pyongyang*, even if inadvertently, reveals the discrepancy between the North Korea that Mister Guy expects to see and the actual situations that he observes but does not fully perceive. While Delisle's cultural identity as a Canadian living in France requires consideration, my examination of otherness in *Pyongyang* does not intend to rearticulate the reductive dualism of East and West. It is hard to overlook the negative perception of North Korea in South Korea despite

their shared history, culture, and language. Han S. Park, for example, notes, "preconceptions and prejudices about North Korea are frequently used as common sense" (39), and Jin Woong Kang admits, "misconceptions and prejudices about North Korea show that the remnants of the Cold War are not entirely overcome" (14) in South Korean society.[4] With this in mind, a critical approach to Delisle's text provides an opportunity to discern not only the Western visitor's gaze but also various other gazes that want to see North Korea as "we" believe it to be. From such a perspective, *Pyongyang* allows readers to consider difference and sameness, rather than otherness, in the people whose nation was once labelled as part of "the axis of evil."

II. Inside the World of the Soldier and the Toy

Like Delisle's other travelogues, *Shenzhen* (2000) and *Burma Chronicles* (2007), *Pyongyang* is neither in colour nor exactly black-and-white but instead filled with greyness of different degrees. The colour grey works effectively in *Pyongyang* for visualizing the opacity, if not obscurity, of North Korea, which is not easy for an outsider to penetrate at first. The difficulty is adumbrated at the beginning of the book. When Mister Guy meets his guide Mr. Kyu at the airport, the panel represents Mr. Kyu as a thick grey silhouette. The interior of the airport is dark due to a power shortage, and Mr. Kyu is standing indoors with his back to the sunlight. Upon closer examination, however, Mr. Kyu's face and clothes are not completely obliterated; they are dimly outlined in dark grey. Mr. Kyu's blurred appearance underscores why readers should scrutinize *Pyongyang*; otherwise, they may only find the Western stereotype that sees North Koreans as unknowable.

The first few pages of *Pyongyang* appear to reinforce Western stereotypes about the absurdity and eccentricity of North Korea. The awkward formalities for entry, the mandatory company of attendants, and the foreign visitors' obligatory floral tribute to the gigantic statue of the nation's founder, Kim Il-sung, are all peculiarities of the North Korean nation. *Pyongyang* highlights two national features of North Korea: economic deprivation and dictatorship. The economic difficulties are epitomized by low quality meals, non-functional elevators, buses manufactured in Hungary in the 1950s, an empty grand ballroom in a hotel, lack of goods at a department store, and so forth. The local conditions are dreadful, but Mister Guy's humorous, if not sarcastic, reactions serve to lighten the mood without minimizing the seriousness of the economic

problems. While looking at an empty dish in his hotel, a metaphor for the food shortage in North Korea, for example, Mister Guy abruptly picks up a toothpick and says, "[T]he toothpicks must be handcarved" (43). Similarly, when his translator Mr. Sin keeps refusing to explain the reason for citizen labourers, referring to them instead as "volunteers," Mister Guy blithely responds, "Ah!" (57).

Likewise, Mister Guy makes jokes about even politically sensitive issues. In a passage that mocks North Korea's surveillance culture, for example, he expresses shock at discovering the face of Kim Il-sung's son, Kim Jong-il, in the mirror on his desk. After realizing that the mirror reflects Kim's photograph attached to the wall, Mister Guy remarks, "Ha ha . . . What a joke!" and adds, counting his days left in Pyongyang, "I've gotta get outta here" (132). Mister Guy does not hide his cynicism toward the North Koreans' worship of Kim Il-sung either. One day, he and a group of North Korean soldiers bow to Kim's statue together at the International Friendship Exhibition, a holy place for the dead leader. While the soldiers have "tears in their eyes," Mister Guy narrates, "[I was] biting my tongue to keep from laughing out loud," because the statue seems ridiculously alive due to certain special effects (105).

The inseparability of North Korea's economic backwardness and the idolization of its former leader is inferred in a splash page. It shows Kim Il-sung's gigantic portrait on the top of a building as the only lighted spot in the darkness of the city (49). In *Pyongyang*, visual imagery in splash pages serves to underscore the otherness of the nation. Delisle's illustrations of monolithic public structures like the Tower of the *Juche* Idea (65), the Monument to Party Founding (97), and the incomplete Ryugyong Hotel (113) embody lifelessness and stagnation. On other splash pages, a huge propaganda billboard (17), a young girls' accordion band (145), and mass games (161) illustrate nationhood and collectiveness as the top priority of North Korea. The splash pages sometimes include factual information about the nation, but this seeing is not simply objective; it also conveys information about the observer. As John Berger puts it, "[t]he way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe . . . To look is an act of choice" (8). The subtitle of David Shim's *Visual Politics and North Korea: Seeing Is Believing* indicates a similar perspective. Examining photographic representations of North Korea, Shim argues that

> the depiction of something like, for instance, "real" life in North Korea is not initially a copy of the real, as many

> observes would contend, but rather a reflection of the photographer's own interest and prejudices. In this vein, a photograph is an act of visual imagination. Hence, the taking of a picture is as revealing of the photographer as it is of the subject depicted. (28)

Choi discusses Delisle's *Pyongyang* via reference to what she describes as "a detective mode of seeing" (77). "This mode of seeing," Choi writes, "creates a distance between the self and the Other, where the Other is evaluated from a higher moral position." The problematic aspects of seeing are legible in Delisle's splash pages and in his representation of North Koreans. For readers who uncritically take Delisle's travelogue as a source of factual information, *Pyongyang* functions primarily to reinforce the otherness of North Korea and its citizens.

It is necessary to remember, however, that all societies contain complexities that are difficult to grasp. North Korea is no exception. In the introduction to *Ask a North Korean*, Daniel Tudor cautions his readers not to generalize information or knowledge about North Korea: "If you asked a wealthy Manhattanite and a rural Arkansan to describe life in the United States, you'd likely get divergent answers. The same is true of North Korea" (10). It is thus no accident that *Pyongyang* reveals the multifaceted or even self-conflicting aspects of North Korea. Take isolation, for example, which Westerners frequently regard as a definitive feature of the nation. Delisle emphasizes the isolation of North Korea not only by means of Mister Guy's comment ("North Korea is the world's most isolated country," 10) but also by depicting North Korea as a fort protruding on a map, with a caption telling the reader that the Communist Party "sealed off the country to all sides" after the Korean War (26). Nancy Pedri reads this image of North Korea as an example of how "Delisle's cartoon maps . . . adopt a number of discursive strategies—appraisive, evaluative, persuasive strategies—to present a very particular view of North Korea" (101). Using Mister Guy's comment and the cartoon map, Pedri argues that Delisle presents the two kinds of isolation in North Korea: that of the nation as well as the people (Pedri 104). The confinement of North Koreans is also represented by a reappearing image of a lonely tortoise in an aquarium (Delisle 35, 81, 174). In an interview with Kenan Kocak, Delisle says that the tortoise symbolizes his "trapped" condition as well as that of the North Korean people (110-11).

North Korea is not portrayed as completely "sealed off" in *Pyongyang*, however.[5] The presence of Mister Guy in North Korea evinces the

connection, though anemic, between the nation and global capitalism. He is not the only Western animator in town either. Over the course of two months, Mister Guy meets various French colleagues: Sandrine, his predecessor; Richard, who started working in Pyongyang one week earlier; David, an old acquaintance; Henri, who is a producer at a small French studio that Mister Guy once worked for; and Fabrice, who later replaces Richard. North Korea is the French version of "an animation Who's Who" (134), in Mister Guy's own words. On his flight to North Korea, Mister Guy also sees a "French Alcatel employee," a "German mineral water exporter," and a "young Italian foreign aid worker" (9). He later discovers other foreign visitors, including French telecom engineers, Chinese tourists, a Libyan long-term resident, a Turkish delegation, and even Americans who came to retrieve the remains of US soldiers. Moreover, the city has a small "expat microcosm" (116) that hosts parties at which Mister Guy sees foreigners who have come to Pyongyang from different nations for different purposes. As the caption says in the scene of the reunion between Mister Guy and his acquaintance David, *Pyongyang* ensures that "globalization is global" (82).

Mister Guy's claim that "meeting Koreans is next to impossible" (10) is an exaggeration. It is nevertheless true that he is not allowed to freely engage with North Koreans in North Korea. He only manages to encounter a small number of them, such as an animation technician, a chambermaid in his hotel, and local animators at the Scientific and Educational Film Studio of Korea (SEK), not to mention the attendants who always accompany him. The cultural and language barriers prevent both sides from communicating with each other. The technician, for example, keeps annoying Mister Guy by singing or playing propaganda songs (28, 131), and the chambermaid keeps interrupting his sleep early in the morning to switch water bottles in the refrigerator, even disregarding the "do-not-disturb" sign on the door (35, 44). Mister Guy also fails twice to help the North Korean animators to understand the meaning of a cartoon bear character's "typically French gesture" (128), which they need to draw. He explains that people make this gesture when experiencing an electric shock. He even strangely appears to rejoice in the hypothetical situation: "Yes, ha ha ha ha! That's exactly it, an electric shock! Dzzt! Dzzt!" (77). In another instance, he vaguely responds that the gesture means "Ooh la la" while mimicking the cartoon bear's speech and hand movements (128). Differences of language and culture cannot be resolved in a short period

of time. Yet these anecdotes suggest that the nation's isolation is a major cause of the North Koreans' ignorance of manners and cultures widely acknowledged in the outside world.

The North Koreans in *Pyongyang* remain anonymous except for Mr. Kyu and Mr. Sin. Mr. Sin is the North Korean with whom Mister Guy most often talks. The disagreements between them signify not only individual but also geopolitical division. When Mister Guy raises the issue of Korean reunification, for example, Mr. Sin points out the responsibility of the United States for the division against the aspirations of both North and South Koreans. Mister Guy responds, "Hmm . . . I see" (63), but in his mind, he says with a playful smile, "Dream on, pal!" and rebuts that after the German reunification and the Asian financial crisis, South Koreans are no longer enthusiastic about reunification with "a country 46 times poorer than their own" (62). South Korean positions on reunification are open to debate. *Pyongyang* does not intend to seek these out, but Mister Guy's comments in his mind have the effect of aligning South Korea with the rest of world and against the North Koreans.

Mr. Sin is presented not simply as an unknowledgeable civilian. When speaking of the military tension in the Korean peninsula, Mr. Sin is transformed into a military commander (63). The visual change suggestively identifies his voice with the military's, thereby blurring the line between North Korean civilian and soldier. This is not the first time Mr. Sin's civilian-military identity is illuminated. When he is first introduced, two panels show the same figure of Mr. Sin, but his attire switches from civilian clothing to military uniform, and each caption implies that it is not easy for him to free himself from the military way of life: "Mister Sin. Fresh out of eight years of military service" (34). Commander Sin reappears as the captain of "a battalion of animators" (159) in Mister Guy's imagination, following panels that illustrate North Korea's military forces and North Koreans' preparedness for military drills. Another image attached to Mr. Sin and the North Koreans is a smiling clockwork toy that has a Kim Il-sung badge on the left side of its chest. The toy first appears, alongside the caption "[b]ody and soul serve the regime" (59), when Mr. Sin explains the North Koreans' duties to prepare for national events. The toy reappears later when Mister Guy visits the Tower of *Juche* with his attendants (75).

These images of North Koreans as both soldiers and clockwork toys are consistent with "the often-stereotypical ways in which North Korea is

looked at, thus establishing boundaries and difference" (Shim and Nabers 295). In "Imagining North Korea," David Shim and Dirk Nabers discuss two kinds of photographs of North Koreans from the Western media and analyze their "political and ethical significance" (296). On the one hand, Western photographs of North Koreans in "distress, depression, and desperation" or in suffering from malnutrition stereotype the nation as a "wimp" (Shim and Nabers 297). On the other hands, official North Korean photographs of military parades, displaying North Koreans as a "homogeneous, brain-washed, and robot-like mass" (301), offer evidence that the nation is a "menace" (300-01). The representation of North Koreans in military parades also appears in Suki Kim's travelogue, *Without You, There Is No Us* (2015). Kim infiltrated North Korea in 2011 as an English teacher and documented her observations of students from the ruling class, whom she describes as follows: "My little soldiers were also little robots" (278-79).

While Mr. Sin represents a stereotypical North Korean, the way he reifies the otherness of his people is not inherently "North Korean." When Mr. Sin or any other attendant expresses admiration for the achievement of North Korea at local attractions, his performance is not different from that of non-Western local tour guides outside North Korea, who mythologize the distinctions of their inheritance for Western tourists. In "Imagineering Otherness," Noel B. Salazar notes how "global tourism is the quintessential business of difference projection and the interpretive vehicle of Othering par excellence (with many peoples now cleverly Othering themselves)" (690). The primary purpose of tour guides is not to provide factual information but rather, as Salazar argues, "to satisfy the tourist's wish to see and experience the Other (as imagined since colonial times)" (691). Mr. Sin does not commercialize his knowledge or language capacity, and Mister Guy is never impressed by Mr. Sin's presentation. Nevertheless, it is hard to miss that Mr. Sin willingly embellishes his nation by othering himself for the Western visitor. As a result, like the narratives of other non-Western tour guides, his narrative of national glory inevitably participates in "the constant (re)production of stereotypes and categories of ethnic and cultural difference across the globe" (Salazar 690).

The attendants' explanations, therefore, should not always be taken at face value. Yet Mister Guy assumes that the North Koreans believe in their words. When an attendant says that there are no disabled people in North Korea because "all North Koreans are born strong, intelligent and healthy,"

for example, Mister Guy thinks to himself, "And from the way he says it, I think he believes it" (136). Mister Guy questions the authenticity of what he hears, but he often does not discuss it with the North Koreans. Mister Guy is silent as often as he is talkative. By his silence, he shares his thoughts about North Korea with readers, but not with the local people, thereby further distancing himself from North Koreans, as well as "them" from "us."

The same attitude is witnessed when Mr. Sin and Mr. Kyu inform Mister Guy about the global spread of *Juche*, the official ideology of North Korea, which the attendants promote as "the source of life that invigorates the spirit of all people, transcending latitude and longitude" (73). Mister Guy expresses repulsion but again only to himself: "Do they really believe the bullshit that's being forced down their throats?" (74). He believes that his attendants should know the position of North Korea in the world "[b]ecause they are among the privileged few who are able to leave the country" (75). Their status raises questions about North Korea's isolation again; the borders are not completely closed for North Koreans either. Mister Guy is speechless, however, when Mr. Sin denies the attractions of Paris: "It's full of beggars and it isn't very clean" (75).

To illuminate the reason for Mr. Sin's pretense, Delisle deploys a comic technique called *closure*, which Scott McCloud defines as the "phenomenon of observing the parts but perceiving the whole" (63). The first panel, showing Mr. Sin silently looking out of the window with his arms folded, is juxtaposed with a panel in which the clockwork toy reappears. While the first toy has only one spring in its back, the second toy has an additional spring in its head, connoting North Koreans' lack of critical thinking towards the regime. The image of the toy is followed by another panel showing the location of North Korea's political prison camps. According to McCloud's notion of closure, Delisle's ordering of these panels compels readers to fill the gaps ("gutters") between them, thereby reaching the conclusion that Mr. Sin may end up facing "life imprisonment" if he happens to "let on" about his personal thoughts to Mister Guy (75).

The logic underlying the arrangement of these three panels accords with the dominant "cultural representations" of North Korea widely circulated in the West. As Christine Kim elaborates, "these cultural representations function as a cultural fantasy of the inhuman for the rest of the world, one wherein the spectacular and macabre are pitched as the North Korean everyday" (223). In "Figuring North Korean Lives," Kim argues that the problem with post-World War II human rights discourses

concerns how they "imagin[e] the subject of human rights in Western terms" (222). As a result, she argues that "North Korea functions alternately as a metaphor for the inhuman and as a metonym for Asian incivility" (221) and thereby its historical achievement has been disregarded (224). Bruce Cumings corroborates the latter part of Kim's argument:

> An internal CIA study almost grudgingly acknowledged various achievements of the regime: compassionate care for children in general and war orphans in particular; "radical change" in the position of women; genuinely free housing, free health care, and preventive medicine; and infant mortality and life expectancy rates comparable to the most advanced countries until the recent famine. (viii-ix)

Mister Guy's adherence to a traditionally Western view of North Korean society causes him to overlook the complex subjectivity of Mr. Sin and other people of the same class. They are not simply native informants; as Mister Guy admits (Delisle 75), they are also travelers like himself, who may have "hybrid, cosmopolitan experiences as much as . . . rooted, native ones" (Clifford, "Traveling" 101). As Ulrich Beck writes, "*Transnational* is not conceptually opposed to *indigenous*. Transnationals are local people" (445). Moreover, Mister Guy is not the only one who acts as an observer. To Mr. Sin and his colleagues, Mister Guy is only a short-term visitor whom they should take turns watching. While performing his duties, Mr. Sin thus does not need to tell a foreign stranger what is on his mind at the risk of undermining his position. Mutual distrust is then sensed by both sides. Mister Guy, however, can hardly understand the significance of the local people's unheard voices, which are acknowledged even in Suki Kim's travelogue, a text that rarely deviates from its general skepticism about North Korea: "In groups, [my students] inevitably mouthed the right answer, which would then be reviewed in weekly Daily Life Unity critiques, but in private, their voices resonated" (279).

Even North Koreans with no opportunity to travel abroad were not completely "sealed off" (26) at the time when Delisle visited Pyongyang. During his reign from 1994 to 2011, Kim Jong-il's leadership was tested against "three crises": famine, the emergence of a market economy, and nuclear development (Buzo 247). The "Arduous March" (1994-1996), a catastrophic famine, is estimated to have "claimed the lives of between 200,000 and three million North Koreans" (Tudor and Pearson 18). The

government's inability to supply food and protect their people precipitated a market economy (*jangmadang*) in which daily necessities and foreign products were traded, including smuggled South Korean goods (Tudor and Pearson 25-29, 34-39). The markets that burgeoned in the late 1990s have continued to grow; according to Travis Jeppesen, who has visited North Korea five times since 2012, "[f]ar from being cut off from the rest of the world, the markets have put North Koreans directly in the middle of it" (114). North Korean markets did not only circulate material necessities from the outside in the early 2000s. As North Korean refugee Ji-min Kang recalls, "At first, it was Western culture that initially swept across Pyongyang. After that, Chinese and Hong Kong culture was the next to reach the big cities. Then South Korean dramas and music started to arrive" (qtd. in Tudor 69). Another refugee, Jinyuok Park, shares Kang's observation and underscores the popularity of South Korean television programs: "When I was still in North Korea, I only watched South Korean TV occasionally, and out of sheer curiosity. But these days North Koreans watch it almost every day" (qtd. in Tudor 76). Despite the North Korean government's control, South Korean popular culture had spread even among the elite. Referring to the work of Hye-il Ho, a former North Korean security guard, Ka Young Chung states: "during inspections in 2002, 600kg of South Korean videos, compact discs, and other publications were collected from students at Kim Il Sung University" (141). North Koreans were already aware that South Korea was materially richer and politically freer. Restrictions on information and mobility limit normal cultural flows. But North Koreans are no exception in terms of their connectivity with the world, as an anonymous translator demonstrates in *Pyongyang* with questions about Microsoft Windows and HTML (144). Mister Guy is not impressed, however; he instead stresses the absence of the Internet in North Korea. Upon discovering Autodesk 3ds Max graphics programs installed on computers at a school for gifted children, Mister Guy focuses on something else again: "I bet they didn't buy the licenses" (156). Despite the legitimacy of his concern about license, Mister Guy's remarks ignoring the local economic situation can pose a potential problem, which Michael Faber points out in a review of *Pyongyang* and *Shenzhen*: "There's always a risk that disdain for an oppressive regime can cross the line into disdain for people too poor to be cosmopolitans."

The recognition of the North Koreans in *Pyongyang* as social and cultural subjects interacting with their surroundings can change readers'

reception of Mister Guy's perspective. In "Travelling Culture," James Clifford suggests that the reconsideration of "indigenous collaborators" as "writers/inscribers" can help "to loosen the monological control of the executive writer/anthropologist and to open for discussion ethnography's hierarchy and negotiation of discourses in power-changed, unequal situations" (100). Clifford's argument can caution readers of *Pyongyang* to not entirely rely on Mister Guy's view and to recognize him as the outsider who fails to converse with the local people. Mister Guy is similar to his attendants in that his opinion of North Korea never varies over the course of his visit, thereby continuing to affirm the distance between North Korea and the West. Later in his stay, when a translator brings up US opposition to Korean reunification, Mister Guy breaks his silence to disagree with him, insisting that "the real problem . . . is that you've got only one source of information: the regime" (154). To support his position, Mister Guy picks up a French newspaper cartoon that satirizes President Jacques René Chirac and Prime Minister Lionel Jospin, arguing that when "people are free to criticize . . . at least you can base your opinions on more than one point of view." Turning his back on the translator, Mister Guy then concludes his outburst by remarking, "[D]'you know what *we* say about democracy and dictatorship? Dictatorship means shut up, democracy means keep talking! Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha!" (155; emphasis mine). Mister Guy's skepticism about the potential for change in North Korea is intimated at the end of the book. In an interview, Delisle chooses *Pyongyang* as his favourite work and says, "I really like the ending of the book," though without providing further explanation (112). In *Pyongyang*, there are two scenes in which Mister Guy makes paper planes from recycled storyboard sheets and flies them from his hotel room on the fifteenth floor (114, 176). Mister Guy says, "I don't know why, but it makes me feel satisfied. Especially when I make it [a paper plane] to the river" (114). Here the paper airplane can symbolize the freedom of mobility, which Mister Guy believes does not exist for North Koreans or, temporarily, for him either. Interestingly, the storyboard sheet used for the paper plane on the last page has an image of the bear character making the "typically French gesture" (128) that the animators at SEK did not understand. In this sense, the ending can be interpreted as implying that establishing freedom in North Korea may be as hard, if not as impossible, as overcoming cultural barriers.

Despite essentializing North Korean "otherness," *Pyongyang*, like Delisle's other travelogues, is a complex text that includes representations

of North Koreans as ordinary people, which do not corroborate with Mister Guy's perspective. Ironically, Mr. Sin serves as a good example of this. After visiting a tae kwondo demonstration, Mr. Sin and Mr. Kyu bring Mister Guy to a shooting facility. Lacking military experience, he wildly fires his gun, mimicking Corto Maltese, Hugo Pratt's comic character (142). Mister Guy believes that Mr. Sin and Mr. Kyu "have the advantage of a few years of military training," but he surprisingly obtains the highest score. The subsequent panel shows Mister Guy celebrating by putting his hands up and saying, "Yes!" while Mr. Sin's sullen face silently looks down at his score sheet (142). Mr. Sin's reaction may not seem special; it can be observed in any person whose self-esteem has been hurt. But considering the portrayal of his identity as a clockwork toy and a soldier, Mr. Sin's expression of emotion, not to mention the comical atmosphere of the situation, makes him appear more human, like people in "normal" nations. At another moment, Mister Guy asks Mr. Sin to identify a propaganda song in which "Kim Jong-il" is the only Korean word that Mister Guy recognizes. After Mister Guy imitates the song as "Pa-Pa-Pam / Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa / Kim Jong-Il! / Pa-Pa-Pa" (125), Mr. Sin sings a song that sounds like "Ani-Yooooo-Na / To Yo Suuuu-ki / / Sun-Yo Chouu," and smiles, believing that he has figured it out (126). Yet Mister Guy responds, "No, not that one. Mine was slower," and imitates the song again. Mr. Sin sings five different songs in a row, but Mister Guy keeps saying, "That's not it," "Nope," "Not at all," "Don't think so," and "Uh-uh." The last panel on the page shows Mr. Sin's singing face with the caption, "If we hadn't arrived at work, we could have spent the day going through the repertoire" (126). The propaganda songs undoubtedly praise the glory of Kim Jong-il and his regime. Nevertheless, Mr. Sin is not portrayed as an impenetrable other as in other anecdotes; the onomatopoeic representation of his singing and the sequence of his various faces create a comic effect. At this moment, Mr. Sin is seen as a local person willingly helping a foreign colleague, who cannot identify a local song due to the language barrier.

Furthermore, not all North Koreans in *Pyongyang* are portrayed as homogenous and collective. In the later part of the book, Mister Guy is happy to learn that the current animation director is being replaced by a more skillful animator who "comes from a village near the Chinese border" (151). Considering the new director's success, Mister Guy admits that it is possible to gain social status in North Korea through individual ability, although Mister Guy's admissions are not without reservation:

> [I]n a way, I'm glad to know his drawing skills let him leave his remote village to make a better life for himself and his family. Come to think of it, it's probably the only upside to the whole Asian subcontracting system. The others who wind up in Pyongyang take a far less glorious path. (151)

Later, Mister Guy encounters a young animator who does not join the mandatory screening of a propaganda film in his workplace. When Mister Guy asks for the reason, the young animator asserts, "I don't like movies made here. They're boring" (153). Mister Guy is so impressed that he describes the young animator's words as "the most subversive thing I heard a North Korean say" and "as incredibly bold" (153). No further depiction of the new director or of the young animator follows; nevertheless, the fragmentary anecdotes indicate that North Koreans also desire success and individuality, the same as in Western societies. Mister Guy may not have imagined finding such universality in North Korea, but his encounter with these two North Koreans, along with the anecdotes of Mr. Sin, present moments, albeit brief and transient, when North Koreans are *un*-othered and seen as fellow human beings living in a different society.

The young animator's attitude may preview what the following generations of North Koreans could be like. At the end of his North Korean travelogue, *See You Again in Pyongyang* (2018), Jeppesen describes the soldier who guided him to the Demilitarized Zone and nearby areas during his first visit to the nation in 2012. Jeppesen finds the soldier to be almost the same age as him (early thirties), likely from an affluent family, and "full of questions" (300), about which they have a conversation. Here is Jeppesen's reminiscence of the young North Korean about ten years after Delisle left Pyongyang:

> [W]e find ourselves on common ground, and we both know it, without having to say it. I'm from where I'm from, he's from this place, and there's nothing we can do about it. We are both the products of countries determined to do their own thing, to pursue their agendas and interests with cunning and aggression. Maybe there's a part of both of us that tends to look at the worlds we come from and wonder what's real and what's not.
>
> He looks at me, and I look at him. He smiles and shrugs, says something in Korean. My guide laughs.
>
> "What did he say?" I ask her.

> "Countries are countries," she translates, "But people are people." (300-01)

III. Negotiation between "Our" Belief and "Their" Reality

Pyongyang reinscribes the effect of "our" conventional perspectives on "others" even in the era of globalization. It also evinces that travelling does not necessarily prompt visitors to question "our" previous knowledge of local "others." To stop othering North Koreans, however, is not "to 'whitewash' the behavior of the regime" (Tudor 10). It is a first step toward "an affirmation of the other as both different and the same" (Beck 439). Cumings arrives at a similar point of view and writes, "I have no sympathy for the North, which is the author of most of its troubles" (xi). "But on my infrequent visits to the country," he continues,

> I have been happy—in trying to fathom an undeniable difference, in getting to know ordinary people who say and do the same things ordinary people do in the South, in meeting highly skilled officials who have taken the measure of our leaders more than once (xi).

These experiences lead Cumings to conclude, "*It is their country*, for better or worse—another country." Rüdiger Frank, a German economist, shares Cuming's view, based on his multiple visits to North Korea between 1991 and 2018. In the preface to the Korean translation of *Unterwegs in Nordkorea*, he writes:

> North Korea is certainly not paradise, but it is not hell either. Many people are successful, and many are not . . . We should not have delusions about the North Korean regime and the intentions of its leaders, but we should also avoid blind hatred and stereotypical thinking. The North Koreans are not stupid, simple, uneducated, uncivilized, or cruel. At least in such special circumstances, we can do the same, but nothing more. (10)

The views above presuppose the recognition of both differences and commonalities between "us" and "them." *Pyongyang* presents the possibility of identifying North Koreans by negotiating between two conflicting representations of them: On one hand the North Koreans who correspond with Mister Guy's preconceived notion of otherness, and on the other hand, the North Koreans who do not appear like "them." Both appear in Delisle's text, and it is up to readers which of the two representations

they will primarily take into account.

Notes

1. This work was supported by the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Korea and the National Research Foundation of Korea (NRF-2018S1A5A2A02070219).
2. According to Philipp Wassler and Markus Schuckert, North Korea has opened its gates to foreign tourists "gradually, during the last decade," for the purpose of obtaining foreign currency, although the tourism program is "still far from developed" (123). The government aimed to host one hundred thousand tourists in 2014 and two million in 2020, but the goal does not seem to have been achieved. About six thousand Westerners are estimated to have visited North Korea per year until 2017, when the US government banned Americans from visiting due to the death of Otto Warmbier, who visited North Korea but returned in a vegetative condition (Frank 29).
3. As a French-speaking Canadian, Delisle published *Pyongyang* in French in 2003, with the English translation appearing in 2005. Another notable graphic travelogue of North Korea is Yeong Jin Oh's *A Visitor from the South*, which was published in Korean in 2004 and translated into French in 2008 under the title of *Le Visiteur du Sud*. It won the Prix Asie-ACBD in France in the same year. The travelogue portrays Oh's daily life in Sinpo, North Korea over 548 days (2000-2001), when he worked as an engineer on the construction of a light-water reactor.
4. Park's and Kang's books are published only in Korean. The translations are mine.
5. In 2011, Charles K. Armstrong notes, "The study of North Korea is no longer *terra incognita* in the English language world" (357). He presents as evidence scholarly works, refugee testimonies, journalism, expatriate accounts, films, photographs, and other uncategorized texts about North Korea, including Delisle's *Pyongyang*, published in English in the first decade of the twenty-first century. As Armstrong demonstrates, these publications were made possible because of internal changes within North Korean society, the migration of North Korean refugees, and released Chinese, Japanese, and Soviet archives. Despite the ongoing opaqueness of North Korea, Armstrong argues that the production of further works is "not a problem of insufficient information, but rather insufficient motivation and imagination" (369). In 2017, Tudor notes in *Ask a North Korean* that "North Korea is well represented in English language articles and books," although topics are concentrated on politics and refugee "horror stories" (7).

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