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Planting Seeds in Literary Narrative: Onomastic Concepts and Questions in Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar*

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Abstract

On the surface, Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar* (2001) is a simple story of a very young immigrant girl who considers changing her name so her new classmates will like her. Embedded within the story, however, are key onomastic concepts and questions: What are names? Who decides our names and how? Can we choose different names for different contexts and should we? If we change our names, does who we are change? I revisit scholarly conversations about onomastic theory and discuss narrative as a means of knowing. I draw on Nikolajeva's (2003) work in narrativity, that is, the ways in which the narrative encourages or discourages deeper thought about the implications of the text. Using analytic reading strategies, I demonstrate how Choi's uses of verbal and visual narrative devices give the story depth and create space for readers, including scholars, to parse out and ponder onomastic concepts and questions for themselves.

Keywords: onomastic theory, narrativity, anthroponymy, namegiving, children's literature, immigration, *The Name Jar*

Introduction

One thirty-page, illustrated storybook about a very young immigrant girl who considers changing her name may seem an unlikely subject for onomastic scholarship. Where, however, does onomastic scholarship reside? Is onomastics, as Algeo and Algeo claimed, "an autonomous discipline, overlap[ping] the subject matter of many other disciplines" (2000, 265)? Or are onomastic concepts and principles ensconced so deeply within the substructures of all disciplines that scholars within those fields may overlook them as research subjects? Is it the acts of naming those embedded strands "onomastic" that have caused the discipline to come into existence? "The unnamed is the unnoticed", Algeo and Algeo continued, "and the unnoticed is for cognitive and communicative purposes nonexistent" (265). The question is not esoteric or irrelevant. If onomastic concepts underlie all disciplines, then all disciplines and their research methods are relevant to onomastic scholarship, including studies of literature written for young children.

To provide context, I first offer a synopsis of the story *The Name Jar*, written and illustrated by Yangsook Choi (2001), and I note character and place names included. However, the focus of this article is less on the names and more on the number of underlying onomastic questions raised in the brief conversations that occur in *The Name Jar* (Choi 2001) (hereafter *TNJ*). I argue the less-didactic narrative of the story makes space for readers of all ages to absorb these questions, planting seeds for further onomastic musings and conversations. To that end, I discuss theories of narrative, and I describe the methods I used to study the verbal and visual narratives in *TNJ*, particularly in terms of their narrativity, that is, how the narrative is presented. I then apply narrativity to the choosing of names, identity, and self and to the generating of onomastic questions in *TNJ*. I argue that such questions may lead readers to conversations that extend beyond the reading of the book itself.

Synopsis of *The Name Jar* with Character and Place Names

The uncomplicated plot of *TNJ* follows a young girl through her first week attending a new school in a new country. The first day, the girl is teased on the way to school because of her unfamiliar name, so she decides not to reveal her name in her new classroom. Rather, she begins considering adopting a different name. Her new classmates decide to help by filling a jar with slips of paper on which they have written different names from which she might choose. The girl's mother, the man who owns the market at which the girl and her mother shop, and the girl's grandmother provide perspective about her given name, but none of them tell her what she should or should not do. The girl's teacher also does not insist she tell her given name. Rather, everyone waits until the girl reveals the name she has chosen.

TNJ includes both verbal narrative, in the form of written text, and visual narrative, in the form of illustrations. Names are first encountered visually on the front cover and on the front matter as illustrations of slips of paper with names on them. Most of these names are crudely printed in pencil, suggesting writers who are still learning to form letters and to know the difference in usage between upper- and lower-case letters. A few names are written in ink, some using beginning cursive lettering. Both formats suggest students in the primary grades of elementary school. Interspersed among the names written in English are 18 full or

partial stamped names in Korean hangul, only two of which are translated in the text. Table 1 lists the character names, personal names not assigned to characters, and place names used in *TNJ*.

Table 1: Character Names, Personal Names Not Assigned to Characters, and Place Names in the Verbal and Visual Narratives in *The Name Jar* (Choi 2001)

Page First Mentioned	Context	Names and Notes
Front Cover	Illustration	Printed/English: *Mi[?], gle[?], G[?], [?]DY, Steffan[?], a[?]*
Front Matter Verso	Illustration	Printed/English: *Avery, Dawn, [?]ellA, Justi[?], MICHE[?], T[?]* Beginner cursive/English: *Jessimilia, Sarah, Stella* Stamped/Korean: Five complete and two partial stamps
Front Matter Recto	Illustration	Printed/English: *[?]la, Daisy, Hannah, WENSDY, Miranda, Bet[?]* Beginner cursive/English: *Steffanie, Joanna* Stamped/Korean: Seven complete and two partial stamps
1	School bus	*Unhei*, main character; no other children on the bus are named
3	Airport	*Korea*
6	Classroom	*Mr. Cocotos*, the teacher; visual narrative depicts as possibly of Asian heritage (shape of eyes)
8	At Home	*America[n]*
10	Neighborhood	*Fadil's Falafel, Tony's Pizza, Dot's Deli*—storefront names in verbal and visual narrative and indicated as unfamiliar to Unhei; *Fadil, Tony,* and *Dot* are presumed off-stage characters
11	Illustration	*Kim's Market*—storefront name in both English and Korean; Unhei perceives as familiar
12	Kim's Market	*Mr. Kim*, store owner; visual narrative depicts Mr. Kim as older Asian male (gray hair, facial lines, shape of eyes)
13	At Home	Try-on Names: *Amanda, Laura, Shoozhy* (*Susie*, as pronounced with a "mouth full of toothpaste")
14	Classroom	*Cindy, Nate, Ralph* — classmates; *Daisy, Tamela, Wensday* (sic.)—names put in jar, the last because Unhei "came here on Wednesday"
15	Illustration of slips in jar	Printed/English: *Tam[?], W[?], Justin[?], EMIL[?], LIN[?], G[?], Mira[?], E[?]* Beginner cursive/English: *Ste[?], [?]ilya*
16	Classroom	*Joey*, first time a classmate depicted introducing self
17	Classroom	Visual narrative shows close-up of Unhei's name stamp
18	Classroom	*Marco, Rosie*—classmates; *Miranda, Stella, Avery* —more names in name jar; *Madison, Park, Lex*— favorite street names added by Ralph
27	Classroom	*Grace*, the meaning of Unhei's name in English; said by Ralph
30	At Home	*Chinku* "friend", and as a name stamp

Of the 57 discrete full and partial English-language names found in both the verbal and visual narratives, as listed in Table 1, only four names are linked visually to specific characters[1]: *Unhei*; *Mr. Cocotos*, the teacher; *Mr. Kim*, the owner of the Korean food store; and *Joey*, a classmate. Five more names refer, in the verbal text, to particular classmates: *Cindy, Nate, Ralph, Marco,* and *Rosie*; and *Cindy* reveals that her sister's name is *Daisy*. Two place names (*Korea* and [US] *America*) help readers locate the story within the real world, while four other place names (*Fadil's Falafel, Tony's Pizza, Dot's Deli*, and *Kim's Market*) help readers imagine Unhei's neighborhood. As Mr. Kim is identified as the owner of Kim's Market, readers might logically infer that *Fadil, Tony,* and *Dot* are off-stage characters who own the respective shops. Almost two-thirds of the English-language names are disembodied, written on slips of paper and placed in the jar (36) or are verbally tried on by Unhei (three), raising the question of whether embodiment is a prerequisite for a set of letters/sounds to become a name. Two glosses, 'Grace' and *Chinku* 'friend' are included in Table 1 but are not included in this count.

While Choi's illustrations include children and adults of various races and ethnicities, only Unhei's and Mr. Kim's names are clearly identified as Korean, while *Marco* is a common name among people of Latin heritage. The illustrations of Mr. Cocotos suggest a person of possible Asian heritage, but nothing in the verbal text confirms this. For the rest, Choi has selected character and name-jar names that she assumes readers will think of as typically (US) "American", as Unhei terms the names (8), but that are otherwise unremarkable in and of themselves. For Unhei, every non-Korean name is as unfamiliar as is the name *Unhei* to almost everyone else. The resulting tension between what is perceived as familiar and what is perceived as unfamiliar, and by whom, drives the plot of the story, created for an assumed child audience.

Children's Literature, Narrative, and Narrativity

Adults sometimes underestimate the values and capacities of children's literature and of children themselves. Clark, in describing attitudes of dismissiveness toward children, argued that "our language and culture validate 'maturity'" primarily through "the discourse of infantilization" (2003, 4–5). Rather, Clark asserted, every age deserves to be treated with respect, not as a "stepping-stone" to another, more mature or socially-acceptable age or stage (10–11). I argue that good children's literature respects children's need for information about the world and presents such information through the child's "conceptual field", as Solomon termed it (1985, 152). Good children's literature also respects children's abilities to think for themselves. The best children's literature raises questions, not all of which have pat answers.

Such literature can take many forms. Non-fiction books or curricular materials tend to use descriptive rather than narrative language to introduce terms and to explain cultural differences. On the other hand, *TNJ*, as a literary narrative, embeds onomastic concepts within the context of a story in which characters are confronted with a situation involving names. Kiefer and Tyson (2010) noted that stories offer readers settings in which they "can rehearse and negotiate situations of conflict without risk" (33) both cognitively and empathically. Readers, it is implied, can become better problem solvers. I suggest the best children's literature leaves space in the narrative for readers to explore the underlying conceptual assumptions causing the problem. Throughout this essay, I use *narrative* to refer to both the written/verbal text and the illustrative/visual text, and I use *created* to include works that may be written or illustrated.

Narrativity is how the narrative is told (Nikolajeva 2003). Narratology seeks to understand how the narrative is mediated by the narrativity. For example, in *TNJ* readers encounter the visual narrative first and the verbal narrative second. The first page contains a full-page, close-up portrait of a young child with face and hands pressed against a window, framed in black and encased in something orange (1). The close to life-size portrait commands the reader's gaze to the point that the three small lines of verbal text at the bottom of the page, and overlaid against the orange, might initially go unnoticed. The verbal narrative of *TNJ,* which is set primarily in a US American school (8), begins with a simple sentence: "Through the school bus window, Unhei looked out at the strange buildings and houses on the way to her new school" (1). Most words in the first sentence are one or two syllables in length, and none should seem unfamiliar to US American, English-speaking, children of this age. None of the words, that is, except one: *Unhei*. What is an *Unhei*, and how does the reader know?

The reader, whether child or adult and whether reading independently or hearing the story read, might pause at the unfamiliar word. The visual and verbal narrative both give clues, but it is up to the reader to look for them and to make connections. An *Unhei* is what is pictured as looking through the school bus window, that is, a child. The pronoun *her*, occurring later in the sentence, could thus refer to the antecedent *Unhei* and further define the child as a girl. Moreover, *Unhei* is capitalized, and English-language conventions call for proper nouns/names to be capitalized even when in the middle of a sentence. *Unhei*, then, is the name of the girl looking out the window. The narrativity of the second sentence is what gives readers the space in which to make the connection: "It was her first day, and she was both nervous and excited" (1). Where the first sentence includes active doing (looking through the window, noticing strange buildings and houses) and the implied motion of the school bus toward a future destination, the second sentence is a statement of being. The action pauses to explain and describe. Nothing in the narrative impels the reader to turn the page. The reader can study the portrait of the child, can wonder about the unfamiliar word, and/or can recall similar experiences of riding a bus or of first days at school and, perhaps, can empathize with the child. The reader also might wonder what kind of a name *Unhei* is or whether the unfamiliar word really is a name, both of which are onomastic questions.

Before considering other onomastic questions raised in *TNJ*, it may be helpful to compare the less-didactive narrative of the original text with a more-didactic narrative version and with a descriptive non-narrative rendition of the same. Table 2 presents each of these types of language and briefly explains the level of reader interaction encouraged within each. The first example, less-didactive narrative, has been discussed in the preceding two paragraphs.

Table 2: Comparing the Original, Less-Didactic Narrative Text with More-Didactic Narrative Text and Descriptive Non-Narrative Text and the Level of Reader Interaction Encouraged (LRIE) in Each

Type of Text	Level of Reader Interaction Encouraged (LRIE)
Less-Didactic Narrative (Original Text): "Through the school bus window, Unhei looked out at the strange buildings and houses on the way to her new school" (Choi 2001, 1).	**LRIE High:** The reader is not told *Unhei* is a name or that the name is Korean but is given space to wonder about the word and might infer it is a name. The creator reveals information as the narrative progresses.
More-Didactic Narrative: Through the school bus window, a young Korean girl named *Unhei* (Yoon-hye) looked at the buildings and houses on the way to her new school. They were not like the buildings and houses in Korea. They seemed strange.	**LRIE Low:** The reader is told the girl in the illustration is Korean, that her name is *Unhei*, and why she thinks the buildings and houses are strange. But it is not clear how they are different. The reader is given a visual pronunciation guide. The writer embeds explanation in the narrative moment.
Descriptive Non-Narrative: The girl pictured in the illustration above is riding on a school bus. Her name is *Unhei*, which is a Korean name pronounced Yoon-hye. The buildings and houses she sees through the window seem strange to her because houses in Korea are built differently from those in the United States of America. These pictures show how the houses differ.	**LRIE Very Low:** The reader is given all the information the reporter thinks is needed. Nothing about the text suggests there is more to be read/learned. The writer describes an isolated moment and gives no indication the moment may be part of a longer narrative.

The more-didactic narrative in the second example leaves less space for the reader to think than does the original text, as it delivers more information up front: the girl's name, name's country of origin, and why the buildings seem strange to the girl. Still, the reader is invited to look through the window at the girl or, with the girl, to look out at the buildings and houses. The narrative doesn't explicitly say what about the buildings and houses makes them seem strange, leaving room for the reader to wonder more specifically what the girl sees and why she thinks it strange. The reader must continue participating with the narrative to learn more, but the author guides the reader into particular paths of thinking. By explicitly stating that *Unhei* is a Korean name, for example, the narrative answers assumed questions about the unfamiliar, while at the same time subtly squelching further thinking about the word/name. Instead, the narrative controls the pace, moving readers on to more familiar territory about buildings and houses. Questions about buildings and houses, however, are extraneous, as they are never addressed again in the text. *TNJ* is about names, and the more-didactic narrative in this example, while seeming helpful, misdirects the reader.

The third example in Table 2, the most explicit and least narrative of the three, describes a scene frozen in a specific moment and requires little in the way of reader interaction. Ontologically, the descriptive text implies that this Unhei is a real girl living in the same real world as the reader and with her own real thoughts that are explained in relation to the setting. Nothing in the text looks ahead to the future or behind to the past. In this text, therefore, *Unhei* is a proper noun naming an implied real child. Both the less-didactic and the more-didactic narratives assume a fictional world similar to that of the reader. In these texts, *Unhei* is a literary proper name, denoting a fictional child whose imagined thoughts are discerned in an interpretive interaction between creator and reader.

Onomastic Scholarship and *The Name Jar*

A few scholars have studied literary proper names in print works for young readers, but most studies have focused on naming choices authors have made as they created worlds populated with fictional characters. Algeo (1982, 2001) and Robinson (2011, 2018), for example, discussed Ursula Le Guin's use of charactoynms, names based on character traits, in her fantasy series and in other cross-over fantasy literature (Algeo 2001; Robinson 2010, 2013, 2015), but neither specifically referenced the works as children's and young adult (hereafter, ChYA) literature. Nilsen & Nilsen's (2007) extensive overview of anthroponyms and toponyms in contemporary North American young adult literature explored ways authors imbue their settings and characters with connotative meaning. Black & Wilcox (2011) interviewed authors of ChYA literature to understand how the authors chose proper names, and Sands-O'Connor (2008) traced how the use of West Indian naming in British children's literature "indoctrinated young readers into their positions as owners and

managers" of British colonies. While Bertills (2003) focused primarily on proper names of anthropomorphic characters in children's fantasy literature, her comprehensive work also examined the semantics and literary functions of personal names, as well as issues related to translating names into various languages. Regardless, such works seldom considered whether/how authors use narrative to introduce children to the underlying assumptions about names or to concepts of naming, much less to raise questions about either.

Two scholars, in particular, have written about *TNJ*. Yi (2014) included *TNJ* in her study of fourteen children's picture books depicting Korean Americans or Korean immigration. *TNJ* is one of only four books identified by Yi as involving name selection, a topic Yi termed "infrequently explored in children's literature" (136). Alter (2016) compared *TNJ* with another book, *My Name is Yoon* (Recorvits & Swiatkowska 2003), for the ways in which the books convey assimilation ideology and depict agency or its lack in the characters' choices to keep or change their Korean names. However, neither Yi nor Alter addressed onomastic questions raised in *TNJ*.

I first discovered *TNJ* in 2014 listed in Kiefer's text (2010, 90), which I used in teaching an undergraduate pedagogy of ChYA literature course. Months later, for a one-time, online course, I chose *TNJ* as a short, well-written text relevant to adult students from a variety of majors. I read it aloud while displaying the visual and verbal text on each page. We discussed how the seemingly simple story raised questions about names and naming practices related to disciplines ranging from anthropology and business to political science and sociology. We also explored the narrative devices used to present the story. Years later, I returned to *TNJ* with a greater understanding of narrativity, an introduction to the field of onomastics, and a question: What would a close, analytical reading of the verbal and visual narratives reveal about whether/how the narrativity presented onomastic questions and concepts?

In the intervening years, scholars studying philosophical thinking in children had begun using children's literature to guide discussions on a range of philosophical questions, but neither onomastics nor *TNJ* were part of the discussions (Costello 2013; Wartenberg 2013, 2014), with one exception. The Prindle Institute for Ethics included Hopson's (2020) discussion of issues such as difference, identity, and cultural assimilation as raised in *TNJ*. The author also offered questions adults could use in guiding discussions about the book, and some of these questions are onomastic in nature. Hopson (2020) and all sources referenced here assumed an adult mediating the experience between text and child reader, but none considered the narrativity of the text itself as mediating the experience for readers of all ages, and none considered onomastic or narrative theory as underlying presences.

Theoretical and Methodological Considerations

Algeo ([1985] 2010) suggested that if a theory of names could be developed, it would necessarily be a "weaker" kind of theory than the "strong" theory used in the sciences—i.e., theory as "a generalization that correctly predicts observations, at least most of the time" (139). Rather, the kind of theory more common to onomastics, Algeo wrote, is a "set of categories by which we order our experience and relate one experience to another" but not to the extent that predictions can be made and some set of occurrences be proved to be true (139). Further, Algeo argued, "proof is in the nature of science an impossibility" because the possibility always exists that something new could be discovered that would disprove what previously was accepted as true (138; see also Crotty's discussion of post-positivism, 2010). Almost two decades later, Zelinsky (2002) also lamented that "whatever tentative [onomastic] theory emerges from further research and discussion, it will necessarily be characterized as 'weak theory,' one lacking predictive power" (250). I suggest we reconsider the labels "weak" and "strong" and question the assumed value of predictive power (see also Anderson 2016).

Iser used the terms "hard" and "soft" to describe different ontological and methodological approaches to research (2006, 5). Both approaches are equally active and rigorous, and each contributes to our knowledge base. The harder approach, with more direct and rigid methods, assumes knowledge is discovered through objectively predetermined research questions and through the measuring of data in order to determine the likelihood of something recurring. The softer approach, what Iser described as "an attempt at mapping" (5), assumes knowledge is revealed interactively through methods that are more meandering and malleable. In mapping a text, the researcher responds to a subject or field to document and discuss its characteristics. The researcher then weaves those strands of information into the communal tapestry of knowledge. From that tapestry, other researchers might then notice particular patterns and hypothesize about correlations among them to try to determine the probability of causality. Each approach feeds the other. Mapping narrative text requires an understanding of narrative itself and of narrativity.

Narrative as a Means of Questioning, Exploring, and Knowing

Abbott (2008) defined *narrative* as "the representation of an event or a series of events" (11), and he noted narrative "is the principle way our species organizes its understanding of time" (3). We hear or read a verbal statement ("The chair is broken") or we see a visual image of a broken chair, and we want to know how and when it became that way and who was involved. We want to know the narrative behind the chair becoming broken. So pervasive is narrative as a part of our everyday speech that Abbott claimed it is "a universal tool for both knowing as well as telling, for absorbing knowledge as well as expressing it" (10).

Narratives created for young readers "typically show children [as] relatively new citizens of the world [...] and in the process of learning about it" (Nodelman & Perry 2003, 198). Adult creators embed knowledge, that is, contextualized information and its application, in the narrative.[2] Nikolajeva (2003) argued that one characteristic of written narratives for young readers lies in the "cognitive gap between the adult writer and the child reader" (6). By extension, this gap also exists between the adult writer and child characters, which, Nikolajeva cautioned "demands a delicate balance" (10). When a child character in a story interacts with an idea, the adult author is the one expressing both the concept and the process of grasping the concept. Yet it must appear that the child character is the one initiating the questioning process, exploring the ideas, and processing and absorbing the knowledge. As Pritchard put it, both the "initial inquiry" and the "primary philosophical work" must be borne by the child characters (2020, Sec. 3).

Nikolajeva's (2003) concern about the cognitive gap between adult creator and child reader and/or character was not just about whether knowledge would be conveyed in a manner true to the character and in ways understood by the reader. Rather, Nikolajeva asked, in what ways might the creator "manipulate the reader" toward a particular conclusion or "guide the reader toward 'correct' understanding" (10)? Studying the narrativity of a text helps us determine whether and how the narrative either discourages active thinking or makes space for readers to consider concepts on their own and to derive and express meaning, as well as in what ways and to what degree the creator might have swayed readers' thinking.

Recalling Pritchard's (2020) thoughts, the questions and interrogations also must occur within the child's frame of reference. Solomon (1985) argued, "all names [...] fictional or natural, share a certain identity [as] every name is determined by a context, and every context constitutes a conceptual field" (152), whether that context is our own or is that of a character whose story we read. We respond cognitively and emotionally to a fictional character's situation, Solomon wrote, "precisely because we have experienced it before in the 'text' of our lives" (152). Creators work to create a conceptual field which readers recognize. In works for children, such as *TNJ*, this often means stories set at home and school with family, teachers, and classmates as characters.

However, one part of the conceptual field in works for children often differs from reality in one particularly important way: the role of adults often is diminished, putting the child characters in the position of raising questions and exploring options within their frames of reference. In *TNJ* (2), for example, Unhei's father is pictured once and never speaks. Unhei's mother and grandmother, as well as Mr. Kim, the grocer, express opinions (8, 12, 23), but they do not tell her what to do or what not to do. Mr. Cocotos, the teacher, does not reveal Unhei's name to the class (6–7) but respects her right to be nameless. All other discussion about names occurs between Unhei and other children (4–7, 14–19, 24–30) or between Unhei and herself (13). The children often take action, ask questions, and think through the implications of those questions without overt adult oversight or influence.

Mapping Narrative Text

Mapping narrative text involves close reading, also termed "active" or "analytic reading", which Jacobus described as "examining the text in detail, looking for patterns that might not be evident with a less attentive approach" (2005, 1788; see also Gardner & Diaz 2021, 6–23). Jacobus noted that "close-reading implies rereading" especially with an eye "to the elements of plot, characterization, setting, [...] language, movement, and theme" (1789). Scholars examine visual texts similarly, attending to use of space, color, line, texture, and layout (Rose 2012; Nikolajeva & Scott 2006).

For this study, I made multiple close readings of *TNJ*, an illustrated story where pictures and words combine on every double-page spread to convey the narrative. I attended first to both the verbal and visual narratives and, later, to the narrativity of each. I took extensive notes with each reading, and I listed the onomastic questions raised in the story. I applied the understanding gleaned to analyzing the child protagonist's journey toward choosing a name, an identity, a self.

The Name Jar: Choosing Names, Choosing Identities, Choosing a Self

In one cross-cultural study, Akinnaso found similarities in the naming practices of two disparate groups of people on two continents and concluded, "[P]ersonal names [...] constitute a symbolic system [which is] usually historically constructed, socially maintained, and based on shared assumptions and expectations of a particular community" (1981, 63). But what happens when, through migration, people become part of other symbolic systems? Scholars have studied names immigrant parents give children born in a new country (Gerhards & Tuppat 2021; Wu 1999) and whether/how international university students adopt new names (Chen 2021). By contrast, *TNJ* follows a young Korean child as she decides for herself what name to use in her new country with its very different symbolic system.

However, neither the narrative itself nor the narrativity of the narrative fully explicate the child's thought processes. The narrative of *TNJ* implies some things and is silent on others, making space for discussion about various possibilities. As noted earlier, the adult characters are either voiceless or offer non-directive comments, leaving room for the child characters to take charge and to become agents of resolution and of their own onomastic interrogations. The narrativity of both verbal and visual narratives encourages readers to consider the onomastic questions raised. But beyond these derivative questions lie the immediate questions Unhei faces: What name will she choose and how and why?

Choosing Names

After being teased because of her name on the bus ride to school, Unhei becomes aware that her name has marked her as Other, as outside the other children's cultural framework and outside their symbolic system.[3] Soon after, in her new classroom, another child asks her name (6). This time, Unhei chooses to withhold the information and replies, "Um, I haven't picked one yet. [...] But I'll let you know by next week" (7), implying awareness on Unhei's part that choosing a name is an option. Perhaps she has overheard her parents or other adults discussing ways to fit into their new surroundings. Or perhaps she knows other immigrant children who have adopted new names. Regardless, Unhei does not say her parents have not picked a name for her yet. She takes responsibility for the choice, and she buys time to make the decision.

Even though no one teases her on the bus ride home, "Unhei kept thinking about her name" (8). Unhei does not tell her mother what happened that morning but says, "I think I would like my own American name" (8). The use of "my own" again suggests awareness that other immigrants have taken new names for themselves. The mother, however, "looked at her with surprise" and asks why (8), suggesting either that the family has had this discussion and has decided not to change their names or that the mother had never considered the possibility her daughter would want to change her name. Still, the mother does not forbid Unhei to take a new name. Unhei "complains" that her name is "*so* hard to pronounce" (8, emphasis in the original), and that she doesn't "want to be different from all the American kids" (8). Later, she worries whether "the American kids will like me" (13). Her name has become the focal point for all that is uncomfortably unfamiliar in her new surroundings, and Unhei takes action.

Unhei's classmates also take action. Unlike the children on the bus who make fun of her name before dispersing,[4] the children in her classroom take her nameless plight to heart. They fill a jar with slips of paper on which they have written names that have meaning to the donors. One girl adds her baby sister's nickname, saying "she said you can use it if you want" (14). A boy adds a name of a story character who was "smart and brave", while another boy adds the name of the day Unhei arrived at school (14). The names speak as much to the children's perceptions of Unhei as a person as they do to her need for a name. The children continue to add names, and they discuss how Unhei might choose. Ralph says Unhei "can pick whatever you like—or pick them all, and you'll have the longest name in history!" (14), while Rosie suggests Unhei "close your eyes and draw a name" (18). And if Unhei doesn't like the name she has picked? "'Well, we didn't get to choose *our* names when we were born, did we?' Rosie argued. Everyone thought about this" (18, emphasis in the original), including, perhaps, the reader.

Choosing Identities

Unhei focuses on her name, but the narrative suggests a deeper conflict involving her identity as a stranger. Twice, Unhei refers to wanting to be like and to be liked by "the American kids" (8). Even though the illustrations depict children from various ethnic and racial backgrounds (4–5, 6–7, 10–11, 19, 24–25), to Unhei they all are "American kids" with names that sound different from hers. At home, however, Unhei is

reminded to "study hard, behave nicely, and get good grades to show you're a good Korean" (9). Being identified as Korean when she is no longer in Korea disrupts Unhei's sense of identity, affecting how she views her Korean name.

Later, as Unhei and her mother walk to the market, they pass "Fadil's Falafel, Tony's Pizza, and Dot's Deli" (8), suggesting other cultures, other histories, other symbolic systems. To Unhei, however, they all are lumped together as Other because "nothing sounded or looked familiar—until they got to Kim's Market" (9). "Familiar", the narrative suggests, is relative to one's own historical context regardless of the length of that history. *Unhei* was an unfamiliar name belonging to a person unfamiliar to the children on the morning bus ride, just as *Fadil*, *Tony*, and *Dot* are unfamiliar names to Unhei now. By afternoon, Unhei was no longer unfamiliar, so no one teased her. But is identity a matter of what is familiar? Or is it something deeper?

Twice, Unhei's name is called "beautiful". Unhei's mother identifies *Unhei* as beautiful because "Your grandma and I went to a name master for it" (8). At the store, Mr. Kim responds to Unhei's name with, "'Aah, what a beautiful name [...] Doesn't it mean *grace*?'" (12). Unhei nods, suggesting she knows her name's meaning. Unhei's name has a socio-cultural context. It was sought for, deliberated, perhaps prayed over, by a respected community member, was lovingly bestowed, has meaning, and is thought beautiful. Still, Unhei is undecided; in her new socio-cultural context, her name is an oddity. That night, while brushing her teeth, she tries on different American names, first cheerfully but gradually less so, until "her smile turned down. Nothing sounded right. Nothing felt right" (12). The visual narrative shows Unhei standing on a small stool at the sink with her back to the reader and only a small part of her face visible in the reflection from the mirror. Stool, child, sink, and mirror exist in a space devoid of any other contextualizing images. Unhei is alone in a liminal space between the cultures of Korea/home/family and America/school/classmates.

Choosing a Self

Deeper than the question of identity, which often is contextualized by our surroundings, is the question of who we are as selves. Ultimately, this is the decision Unhei faces, irrespective of what name she chooses or how she navigates between cultures. As none of us appears out of nowhere, each of us having parents and grandparents, our sense of self often is intertwined with family members. Yi (2014) noted the importance of grandparents in Korean family structure and of their influence in immigrant children retaining ties to Korean culture (139). Unhei's grandmother has remained in Korea, but her presence runs through the story, largely through the gift of an "ink pad and a small red satin pouch" given to Unhei at the airport when they left (3). "'Your name is inside,' [the grandmother] had said. *My name*? Unhei had wondered" (3). Inside, Unhei discovers "a wooden block with her name carved in it", and she often "run[s] her fingers along the grooves and ridges of the Korean characters" (3). For Unhei, her name isn't just something she hears people say or sees on paper; she can touch and handle her name, too. At the end of Unhei's second day of being nameless to her classmates, and after most students have left the classroom, Joey introduces himself to her and asks, "And you? Don't you have *any* name?" (16, emphasis in the original). Unhei answers indirectly by showing Joey her name stamp and how it works. Unhei explains the wooden block is more than just decorative: "In Korea, I can use it as a signature when I open a bank account or write a letter" (17). Joey does not know what sounds or what meaning the characters represent, but he calls the visual depiction of her name "beautiful" and asks if he can keep the paper (17). Unhei agrees, in essence sharing a part of herself with Joey.

A few days later, Unhei receives a letter from her grandmother, which reads, "Here the moon is up, but there the sun is up. No matter [...] how different America is from Korea, you'll always be my Unhei. Your grandma forever" (21). Earlier, Unhei has noted the rain falls in her new country same as it did in Korea (16), implying, perhaps, that even though the American and Korean words for "rain" sound different and are written differently, each still denotes drops of water falling from clouds in the sky. Could Unhei choose either way and still retain her sense of self? Will her grandmother still think of Unhei as her forever granddaughter regardless of what name she uses in America? Unhei fills a piece of paper with impressions from her name stamp and then thinks "for a long time in front of the bathroom mirror" (21).

Coming to a Decision

Circumstances seem to force Unhei into revealing her name prematurely when, on Saturday, Unhei walks alone to the market and Mr. Kim greets her by name (23). Mr. Kim has been helping a customer, who turns out to be Joey. Wide-eyed, Joey asks, "'Your name is Un-hee?'" (23). Unhei's only choices appear to be to lie or to confirm the truth. Choi slows the narrative, thus drawing the reader into Unhei's decision-making, by having Unhei again buy time to think. Unhei first looks at Mr. Kim, then turns to Joey, then nods slowly, and finally tells Joey how to pronounce her name (23). Mr. Kim, who has remained silent, respecting Unhei's

agency in determining when to reveal her name and to whom, then adds that it means 'grace'. Three times Unhei's name has been termed "beautiful", and three times Unhei has been reminded of her name's meaning.

On Monday, the name jar is missing. One slip of paper is on Unhei's desk, which she reads and puts in her pocket. However, Unhei says she has read all the names and is "ready to introduce myself" (25). Unhei thanks her classmates for "the beautiful names and funny names you thought of for me. [...] But I realized that I liked my name best, so I chose it again" (26–27). On the chalkboard, Unhei writes her name in both English letters and Korean characters, underscoring that the same sounds can be represented in different ways and that the different representations can refer to the same person. The name jar, which Unhei recognized as her new classmates' attempt at friendship (14–15), plus Unhei's embodiment of the meaning of her name, *grace*, has led the class through an onomastic journey and into greater understanding of each other. Unhei's "self", having become reconciled to being different in this new classroom, remains identified by the name *Unhei*.

Two names, glosses, have yet to be discussed. The first occurs when Unhei reveals the meaning of her Korean name and Ralph shouts, "'Grace! Grace In-Hye!'" (27). Here, 'Grace' could be considered a translation of *Unhei* or it could be an English-language name with which Ralph was familiar. Unlike the first appearance of the name *Unhei* (1), which was a capitalized word in the middle of the sentence suggesting it was a proper name, both uses of *Grace* appear at the beginning of Ralph's exclamations and, therefore, are capitalized anyway. Regardless, however, of whether Ralph was thinking of *Grace* as a translation or as a meaning of *Unhei*, the inclusion of his words in the narrative raises more questions: Did Unhei consider using the English-language version of the meaning of her name? If so, did the familiarity of sounds override the meaning of her name? Or is there a deeper linguistic connection to be explored?

The second occurs after school when Joey brings the missing name jar to Unhei's home, confessing he took it because "I wanted you to keep your own name" (29). Unhei "happily" takes the slips of paper from the jar "as a souvenir" and offers Joey the paper that had been left on her desk earlier (29). Joey, however, tells her to keep it, and suggests Unhei could put "'some Korean nicknames in [the name jar] for us. Names with good meanings'" (29). Joey reveals he already has a Korean nickname, one that Mr. Kim helped him choose. He pulls out his own name stamp and adds his stamp to the one Unhei had placed on the paper previously (17). "'Chinku,' Unhei read. 'That means *friend*!'" (30). Choi ties up the loose ends of the plot but raises a few last questions: Are nicknames "real" names? Can names have bad meanings? To what extent can we embrace, embody, ignore, or counteract the meaning of a name and with what consequences? And, finally, what other questions have we yet to ask about names?

Conclusions

Narrative, Abbott (2008) noted, conveys knowledge in ways descriptive text cannot, as I have demonstrated in this study of narrativity in Yangsook Choi's *The Name Jar* (2001). By controlling the pace of the narrative, revealing information gradually, and giving the child characters agency in helping a new classmate make a decision about her name, her identity, and her sense of self, Choi makes space for readers of all ages to become a part of the onomastic questioning and of the decision-making process. While this study consisted of only one short text interrogated and analyzed by one researcher, perhaps the focus on the onomastic questions raised will prove useful to other scholars. Other narrative texts might reveal other insights; another researcher might approach *TNJ* differently or, following my approach, might notice things I missed.

This study also suggests three lines of further research. First, along with a taxonomy of names, it might be useful to develop a taxonomy of onomastic questions to help guide future study. Some broad interrogative categories discussed in this study include: What are names and how do we know? Who decides our names and how do we accept the names we are given? What is the relationship between name and identity? How do names affect our sense of self? Second, I suggest that literature of all genres, presented through all forms of media, and intended for all types of audiences, offers a rich field for onomastic studies through phenomenological, ethnographic, semiotic, and other types of theoretical stances and methods. Finally, I suggest that hard scientific studies of onomastics must be foregrounded by "soft" studies such as this one that map the field, unearth the underlying presuppositions, and raise the questions for study. Each type of study depends on the other, and there is room in the field of onomastics for both.

Notes

[1] *TNJ* is unpaginated. For clarity in Table 1 and throughout, I have numbered the pages. With regard to Table 1, the number of discrete full and partial English-language names was derived by counting all full names once, regardless of how many times they were used in the narrative. This means three things: First, only the first appearance of names such as *Unhei* is recorded in the table, and I counted such names once; second, I recorded first instances of names appearing in both the visual and the verbal narratives separately, but I only counted such names once; third, all partial name-jar names were counted individually, as I could not assume that *Mi[?]* referred to either *Miranda* or to *MICHE[?]*.

[2] The reverse is also true. For example, math textbooks, usually thought of as strictly non-fiction, often include fictional narrative word problems to help make abstract concepts more concrete.

[3] Throughout the story, the children on the bus and in the classroom are described as "yelling" (4), "noisy" (6), speaking "loudly" (6), and "shouting" (6, 25, 27). Visually, the children are depicted as not sitting in their seats (4–5), sprawling (6–7), and leaning forward into Unhei's space (4–5, 19). Their behavior heightens the discomfort Unhei feels on that first day. The children are not just outside her symbolic system; they also have different understandings of appropriate behavior.

[4] Gerus-Tarnawecky argued that literary proper names can "perform a stylistic and expressive function in works of literature" (1968, 312) by adding auditory enhancement through alliteration, rhyme, rhythm, and paranomasia, or word play involving double-meaning. "The fact, that names tend to appear on two levels", wrote Gerus-Tarnawecky, "suggests that some names might be poly-functional" with such names having both semantic meaning and expressive functions (323), both "euphonious and cacophonous" (320). *Unhei*, the name, as placed in the first sentence of *TNJ* (1), may also perform an expressive function. Because no pronunciation guide is given at this point, the reader may hesitate, stumble over, mispronounce, or dismiss as unpronounceable the unfamiliar name. These actions could then be considered expressive and stylistic functions of the literary proper name, *Unhei*, as they mimetically foreshadow the reactions of the children on the bus to Unhei's name (4–5).

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