

In the Grotto and On the Surface

The Female Grotesque in *An Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry by Korean Women*

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Abstract

This thesis includes analyses of three poems from the poetry collection *An Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry by Korean Women (2006)*, translated by Don Mee Choi. The collection deals with the themes of abjection and marginalization. This thesis has selected one poem from the three poets in the collection, Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon, and Yi Yon-ju to perform a close reading on. These three Korean poets have made waves within the Korean literary industry by fighting against institutionalised discrimination and through defying the gender norms that are ascribed to female poets. This thesis employs the literary concept of the female grotesque to answer the question on how the collection *An Anxiety of Words* portrays the themes of abjection and marginalization. The female grotesque is seen as a feminist concept that focuses on using the female body and experience as a way of addressing problems in society. The main theories used in this thesis come from Mary Russo and Jane Ussher who talk about the female grotesque in regards to its literary history and its cultural consequences. In answering the thesis question this thesis argues for an analysis of the collection, and collections similar to *An Anxiety of Words*, without an emphasis on the historical and national contexts because of its universal themes, marginalization and abjection.

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Introduction

During the twentieth century the feminist movement came in multiple waves in which people fought for the political, economical and biological rights of women (Jones 45). During the 1970s and 1980s in South Korea things were no different despite it being one the harshest political periods in the country's history.

The 1970s and 1980s in South Korea were mainly concerned with being the main frontier during the Korean War. Despite this tumultuous period the dictator Park Chung-hee oversaw a period of rapid economic growth and laid the foundations for Korea's modern infrastructure through the process of industrialization. The effect of this process was an increasing income disparity between sectors and classes. President Park Chung-hee was eventually overthrown and followed by an even more extreme martial rule under the command of president Chun Doo-hwan, which led to an ever bigger divide (Choi xvi; Jones 39, 80).

During this period of dictatorship, three female poets, Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon and Yi Yon-ju, came up as part of the minjung literary movement. In contrast to the minjok, a nationalistic literary movement, the minjung movement was concerned about the people who were most oppressed by the military regime. Korean feminists fought against women's oppression regarding imposed gender norms, class division and national institutionalized discrimination. Their resistance resulted in them playing a part in the "minjung" movement (Choi xvii; Jones 90, 135).

Ch'oe, Kim and Yi have been labeled as feminists by their peers. They used their literary capabilities to challenge the predominantly male and hierarchical societal structure of Korea. They have also transcribed the political and revolutionary intent of the marginalized people of Korea into their poetry (Choi xxii-xxii).

This is also what drew the translator, Don Mee Choi, to their works.

I simply knew that I connected intuitively to their words and felt an urge to translate them into English. Later, I came to understand that what attracted me were their fierce and innovative poetic voices, and their critical consciousness of Korean women's lives under patriarchy, capitalism, and neocolonialism. As I began translating their work, I was able to reconnect with my original home. The translation process enabled me to create a bridge through which I could return home and understand the two locations - my place of origin and my new home in the U.S. I came to understand that my dislocation was born out of these two location of unequal power. - Don Mee Choi, *An Anxiety of Words*, xvi.

In the quote above Choi talks about the critical consciousness of the poets, the innate feeling of inequality and desire to bridge the different locations of her life. She talks about understanding both the US and Korea through the poetry of Ch'oe, Kim and Yi which leads me to believe that there is a universal quality to their work.

Choi is the translator and editor of the collection *An Anxiety of Words: Contemporary Poetry by Korean Women* and is also a poet herself. The translated collection made the poems available in English for the first time and took their message outside Korea. The collection was published by Zephyr Press in 2006. Zephyr Press is an organization that focuses on publishing literary titles that "foster deeper understanding of cultures and languages" (Choi iv). The blurb on the back of the collection says almost everything a reader needs to know about its social and literary significance:

An Anxiety of Words is the first anthology of Korean women's poetry that challenges one of Korea's most enduring literary traditions: that "yoryu" (female) poets must be gentle and subservient. (...) These three contemporary poets defiantly insist that poetry can be part of social change - indeed, that it must be. - *An Anxiety of Words*, back cover.

The collection focuses on the works of the three poets Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon and Yi Yon-ju. Amongst the three Kim Hyesoon has gathered the most notoriety outside Korea. Don Mee Choi, the translator of *An Anxiety of Words* has worked with her on multiple occasions. Most recently, Kim Hyesoon has won the Griffin Poetry Prize for *Autobiography of Death*, written in 2018. This work was also translated by Don Mee Choi and was able to win this international prize because of her translation (Griffin Trust). Kim Hyesoon, more so than Ch'oe Sung-ja and Yi Yon-ju, has been connected to the female grotesque in multiple studies (Griffin Trust, Guernica, Williams 405).

The grotesque refers to anything that departs from the natural and highlights the absurd, ugly and irrational character of a topic. Mary Russo says that the grotesque “only appears in relation to the norms which it exceeds” (Russo 3). It is a genre that is positioned as superficial and pushed to the margins by critics but at the same time is preferred by marginalized groups to express themes of abjection and discourses of liberation (Russo 5, 14; Williams 404). The female grotesque expands on this by focussing on the female experience and the female body to discuss the themes mentioned above (Russo 6).

However, Korean literature has not been studied extensively within the literary field of the female grotesque. This can be explained by the fact that the grotesque is considered a western concept and thus the academic literary field is predominantly centered around Western and English literature. The research on Korean literature that can be found is usually centered around Korean folklore or male poets and as a result the contemporary female poet is barely represented in English academia (Kang 183; Chung 49). Of course, I cannot speak for academic research that is written in Korean but it is still worth noting that not much is found.

Therefore the question that this thesis asks is: “How does the translated collection of poetry *An Anxiety of Words* reflect the theme of abjection and marginalization in relation to the notion of the female grotesque?”

My hypothesis is that the female grotesque enables the poet to put their work in contrast to the works of traditional poets in the same way that the minjung movement worked opposite of the minjok

movement. The female grotesque is used to shock the audience and make them into active readers, inciting thoughts and criticism on society. Their criticism is about the process of abjection and marginalization that happened in Korea during the period of dictatorship. Although Choi's quote in the introduction insinuates that the poetry in *An Anxiety of Words* can be read globally, I believe that the main context of the work is a national historic context. These women have written in a tumultuous political period that is uniquely Korean and therefore their message must be looked at within a Korean context.

To answer the question adequately I will first look at the female grotesque in more detail and use this framework to perform a close reading of three poems from Ch'oe, Kim and Yi regarding the themes of marginalization and abjection.

The Female Grotesque

The notion of the female grotesque has been explained in many ways but I think that Mary Russo explains it best in her book *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess, and Modernity*. Russo explains that the word 'grotesque' comes from the word 'grotto'. It refers to the things that are hidden, dark, visceral and earthly and is associated with a claustrophobic and enclosed experience (Russo 1). Merriam-Webster explains 'grotesque' as "departing markedly from the natural, the expected, or the typical". This definition is linked to Russo's notion that the grotesque only appears in relation to the norms which it exceeds (Russo 3). The grotesque brings things that have been pushed inside the grotto to the surface, meaning that it brings things from a state of marginalization and abjection to the attention of the audience.

While marginalization and abjection might seem to differ from each other in terms of dictionary definitions, both definitions have to do with being off-center in society. Marginalization works on a horizontal level with the marginalized being set aside. Abjection works on a vertical level where the abjected are degraded. Both can be combined by the concept of being in the grotto because a grotto can be accessed by going sideways as well as entering from the top. Just like a hidden grotto, abjection and marginalization are about being ignored and being hidden from the main audience. It is the feeling of being trapped in the place that society has placed you in that links is to the grotesque.

The female grotesque departs from the grotesque because it deals with both the "cavernous female insides" and the "surface models of the female body" (Russo 1, 2). The grotto of the female body refers to the vagina and the uterus and the surface refers to female features, for example breasts. The normal and the traditional only talks about the surface, allowing a woman to be described but not heard. The grotesque on the other hand only about the cavern, expressing a woman's thoughts but not her bodily experience. The female grotesque combines both levels as it creates a mutant woman that can be placed in both (Russo 6).

The mutant woman creates room for an expulsion of female struggles. The reproductive female body operates on both levels, the surface and the cavern, and is a site of fascination and fear and this duality within the reproductive body frees the woman of any regulations (Russo 6, 7; Ussher 1). It is this duality that makes the reproductive body a grotesque body. At the same time, the reproductive system of the women is also something that cannot be suppressed or controlled and this refers to the expulsion. The things inside the woman - fluids and/or a baby - will have to come out eventually. The female grotesque fits well within the context of feminism before the 1990s which Russo described as heterogeneous, conflictual and contradictory (Russo 1).

The duality of the body leaves the body in a heterogeneous state, it is not simply one thing but both simultaneously (Russo 1). The heterogeneous quality of the female grotesque lends itself to the discussion of liberation and abjection because it can reinforce the status that society has already placed upon women to such an extreme that it rejects the status as well as use the status of women to explicitly reject the dominant ideologies. As an example, Yi's poem "What's Wrong?" explicitly rejects the dominant ideologies about sterilization and abortion through discussing a personal experience in a disconnected way and conveys no emotion. A line that shows this disconnection tone is actually the very first line of the poem: "One young woman had surgery to become childless". The neutral tone in combination with the clinical description contrasts with the idea that all women desire to be a mother and will love their child unconditionally.

The poets in *An Anxiety of Words* can all be linked to the female grotesque and feminism in different ways through their personal, autobiographical experience. The collection expresses, as the title already suggests, the anxiety that comes with speaking. This anxiety works both ways. It is the anxiety that the empowered feel when the marginalized speak up. It is also the anxiety that the marginalized feel, afraid that they will not be heard. All three poets address the fear of speaking out as a woman in a patriarchal society through the use of imagery from the female grotesque. They subvert, defy and ridicule the norms and conditions that have been given to them as female poets and to womankind in general and do this in their unique treatment of form and imagery. Their poetry, in line

with the theme of the collection, is focused on the theme of abjection and marginalization as will be demonstrated by the analyses in the following chapters.

Ch'oe Sung-ja

Ch'oe Sung-ja's poem "Went to the Sea in Winter" was originally published in her collection *Happy Diary* in 1984. The poem is written in free verse and consists of 21 lines that are difficult to divide into stanzas.

The poem begins with the the tragic image of a dead woman. She "floated for three days, then was caught by a patrol boat" (ll. 3-4). No one noticed her dead body for three days and in the end she was caught like a fish or an object. Her body is compared to plastic (l. 10), to trash. She has become a socially-degraded body, anonymous and worthless.

"(The polluted sea)" (ll. 10, 21) can be polluted because of her or the polluted sea is what killed her. The process of the sea polluting the woman has become her death because her body had been opened to the sea (l. 5). The text is repeated twice within parentheses in the poem and is the point where the female grotesque is present in both the content and the form. The parentheses make it seem like the polluted sea is within a grotto, enclosed from the rest of the text. The corruption and the pollution of the sea has reached her children as well because the sea has entered her body, it has entered the grotto that is the female body.

"The woman's vagina" (ll. 5, 7) also refers to the grotto aspect of the grotesque. Within the vagina the visceral and earthly quality of female body is evoked. The woman can be seen as Mother Earth, who came from the sea, and birthed her children, humankind, and sent them across the world. In Korean myths the woman usually disappears after giving birth because they have fulfilled their purpose (*Guernica*) but here she is mentioned one last time in lines 9 and 10 although she is dead.

Lines 7 till 17 describe the horrible lives of the children. They come out "pale and sickly" (l. 7) and already at a disadvantage because of their state of being. A sick child is vulnerable and prone to die early. They struggle immediately after they leave their mother's body and step onto the surface (l. 8). Lines 11 and 12 indicate that they live in solitude, away from each other, because they have been

“scattered among the oceans of five continents”. They have their houses and their own children (ll. 13-15) in the respective societies on the surface but in the cave, out of the public eye, the illness and their condition spreads (ll. 16-17).

“The night” (ll. 17, 18) is linked to the hidden and the dark. In contrast with their houses and families that can be seen and traced the children of the woman also live within the dark. Not only do they live, they flourish by spreading the disease syphilis and starting a revolution (ll. 17-18). They have “staggered from the sea’s bright sun” (l. 8) and this struggle is not there in the dark.

The lack of struggle that they experience in the night is an indication of the hopeful message of the poem that comes in lines 18 and 19 “one long unbearable night they’ll begin a revolution, an invincible revolution”. The children will change the world because they have experienced all of the horrible things mentioned above. The change is certain because it is an invincible revolution. It is a promise that the poet leaves the readers with and it changes the way lines 20 and 21 are read. “Went to the sea in winter (the polluted sea)” is no longer a bleak image of death and revulsion but an image filled with the promise of change.

Ch’oe Sung-ja has caused a stir within the literary realm of South Korea through her combination of violent images and death with a hopeful and deviant tone. This combination breaks with the decorum of female poets because Ch’oe’s language was deemed “too rough” (Choi xix, 3). This roughness is found in the core message of her poetry. Her overall tone may be hopeful and deviant but the core of the poems challenge political regimes and the passive poetic voice that is demanded of female poets (Williams 400). Guernica’s interview with Kim Hyesoon focuses on the gendered system in Korea. They talk about the Korean language where ‘siin’ means poet and ‘yoryu siin’ means female poet. With this other word for female poet there comes the expectation of pretty, sentimental and passive poetry (Guernica).

These expectations come from a patriarchal society where a woman is constantly a subject of a male master. As a girl it is the father, as a woman it is the husband, and as an elderly woman it is the son. If a woman does not adhere to these rules she becomes an outcast and is seen as strange

(Guernica). Ch'oe uses these outcasts or socially-degraded people, these bodies, to illustrate the power of this position. Being an outcast means that you are able to generate and form your own identity. Ch'oe's poetic subjects have a non-conforming identity, anonymous, and in this they surpass the gender norms of the patriarchy (Choi xix-xx, 3; Williams 401).

The outcasts in the poem, the children, bring the joyful promise of change. With the knowledge of this promise the first part of the poem changes as well. The woman is no longer a tragic image but a heterogeneous image. It has become a grotesque place, a site of both death and conception. In death she has found the level of agency that is necessary for a revolution. She has become the deviant vessel of change.

Its message is supported by the form. The free verse and the lack of stanzas reveal its unconventional character in both content and form. The liberation that comes with not having to conform to a set of rules that comes with sonnets or other forms of poetry supports the children's liberated status as non-conforming and marginalized subjects. Just like the poem that cannot be divided into stanzas, liberation and change do not come in set stages but as a continuous process.

All in all, the poem starts off with what seems to be a victim of society. A marginalized and anonymous woman left unnoticed. The entire poem shows the tragic and disadvantaged state of the woman and seemingly repeats this portrayal with the children who stay anonymous like their mother and have their own diaspora to multiple regions across the world leaving them with a fractured identity. The grotesque imagery of the woman and the acts of her children address their positions as suppressed and dislocated people within society. Within society they seem powerless but line 18 changes that when it speaks of a revolution. The grotesque characteristics of the children; their illness and their ability to spread syphilis are a form of empowerment and allow them to defy societal expectations while participating and also start what will be a continuous process of complete liberation.

Kim Hyesoon

Kim Hyesoon's poem "Song of Skin" talks about the experience of a mother breastfeeding her baby. Kim uses the concept of a suckling babe that is often seen in classical art (Ussher 15, 94-95) but instead of beautifying the experience Kim defiles the action by portraying the child as an evil and unstoppable force that feeds continuously at the cost of the mother. The act of breastfeeding is no longer a symbol of motherhood and the relation between mother and child but a site of battle for survival. This combination of motherhood and violence is a strength of Kim whose poetry is characterized by its depictions of violence, vomit, trash, decay, death, motherhood, and love (Guernica).

Kim's perspective on breastfeeding in this poem reminds me of someone who told me almost ten years ago that pregnancy is actually an illness. The baby can be seen as a parasite who takes food and blood from the mother whereas the mother has nothing to gain from the process. With this in mind it is striking that breastfeeding is described as "draining sweet water" (l. 3) and the mother dries out gradually in lines 5-8. For the baby it is sweet and a pleasant experience but for the mother it is not. Jane Ussher talks about pregnancy and breastfeeding in her book *Managing the Monstrous Feminine* in a similar manner. She says that pregnancy is a normalized illness through which the mother is degraded to a silent and passive vessel (87). Breastfeeding is similar because the mother is in a state of abjection and is controlled by the baby's needs. If she resists this she starts leaking, her inner state becomes visible through expulsion.

For some mothers pregnancy and breastfeeding are disconnected experiences but this is at odds with media representations, especially in classical art (Ussher 94-95; Glenum). Kim however expresses a feeling of abjection and powerlessness in her poem through the experience of the female body. She presents an image to the audience that has not been represented as much as the image of a good mother who is glad to feed her baby (Guernica).

For the woman in the poem breastfeeding is also a disconnected experience. Although it is a baby that is nursing the word baby is never mentioned in the poem. The baby is reduced to “the open lips” (l. 1) at the beginning and is later directly addressed (l. 13-14). This choice already debeautifulizes the relationship between mother and child. Instead of an intimate relationship the poem portrays an indifferent and angry mother. The indifference is shown in the lack of action by the mother. The anger is shown by the accusation near the end.

Even though you vomit what you've just eaten,
your open lips still hang onto my nipples,
till my body is emptied - lines 13-15.

The mother blames the baby for their disregard for the mother's feelings and needs. On top of that the food that the mother provides is for nothing because the baby vomits everything up leaving both the mother and the baby empty of sustenance.

In line 9 the poem takes a surreal turn, which is something that Kim is known for (Williams 405). Her surreality focuses on skewering social institutions and normalized aspects of life and society without explicitly mentioning societal topics. Kim disrupts the poem's surface with gore and unpleasant imagery to reveal the grotesque undersides of society (Guernica).

In this poem the mother is compared to nature as the “trees and plants collapse / the Naktong river dries up, and its floor shrieks as it explodes” (l. 9-11). The Naktong river is the biggest river in South Korea and was an important defense line in the Korean War (Edwards 8, 20). The cultural significance of this specific river shows that the destroying the mother despite her warnings and resistance will lead to the destruction of a final defense line leaving the baby vulnerable. This passage can be seen as a commentary on the patriarchal system of society. In a society where men hold almost no regard for women or women's needs the system is vulnerable to self-inflicted damage. The people

in power do not listen and as a result they destroy mothers or leave mothers to destroy themselves.

The destruction of mothers causes a vulnerable next generation.

In the end of the poem Kim also employs imagery of decay. Similar to the mother and the earth even the sky “splits” and “shatters” (l. 17, 18). Until line 17 the decay has been a visceral experience. The feeling of literally drying out in lines 5-14 is related to becoming numb mentally in lines 15-20. Through the use of parallelism Kim expresses that the seriousness of the woman’s condition worsens with each couple of lines. Lines 15 and 16 address her bodily reaction of drying out while lines 17 and 18 focus on the mental. Her mental state can be seen as depression. Post-natal depression is quite common amongst women but is, again, barely addressed in media (Ussher 94-96). “The heaven’s castle” (l. 17) and “the Milky Way” (l. 18) are images of the heavens and these are often used to portray the afterlife. The woman drying out both physically and mentally results in her death in lines 19 and 20. The experience of motherhood has led to the mother’s depression and ultimately her death.

Kim Hyesoon sets the woman in the center of society by making her an equivalent of nature itself. Kim uses images of the earth, the sky and water to encompass all of nature. The experiences of the woman are presented as grand natural phenomena, making it impossible to ignore her. The poem reverses the normalized status of the reproductive process that women are expected to go through by focusing on a mother whose experience is not well represented. This poem is a commentary of the marginalized position of women in a patriarchal society whose imposed role is to deliver a next generation and take care of them.

Yi Yon-ju

The last poem of the collection *An Anxiety of Words* is Yi Yon-ju's "Nursery Notes". Inspired by the horrifying experiences of the women and children in an US military camptown, Yi combines images of life and death to show the constant presence of the lure of death in life. An example of this combination is found in the first line: "coffin-like cradle". In comparing a coffin and a cradle Yi shows similarities between things associated with life and death. The looming presence of death is already visible in the infant's resting place.

The poem is set in a nursery and the speaker has no personal connections to the babies. The speaker refers to the infant in the first line as "it". The speaker is, in Yi's style, a grotesque witness (Williams 409). Yi Yon-ju is a unique poet in this trio because she does not position her poetic personas as the subject of the grotesque but as a witness of the grotesque. The grotesque witness in her poetry can be led back to Yi's own life. She worked in a U.S. military town in South Korea where women and children lived trapped under devastating conditions of military prostitution, environmental pollution, and poverty (Choi 129). Her personal experience as a grotesque witness helps her evoke very realistic poetry.

Each stanza end with the grotesque witness following a kind of protocol from the nursery. The first and last stanza especially involve a literal cleansing from the situation at hand (l. 4, 14). The cleanliness is striking in contrast with the descriptions of the fishy smell (l. 2) and the yellow pus (l. 10). The open ending of the poem, the three dots where there would have been a period stop (l. 15), suggests an ongoing and neverending battle between the cleanliness and the illness.

Despite the lack of a personal connection with the infants, shown by the clinical descriptions of the hygiene protocol, and instead of beautifying the experience of birth and the future life of a baby Yi asks the difficult question of what is to happen with a child that is born within a military camptown: "Who will be able to guide the infants to a faraway place, through the many trials of life

until they reach the silence of the aged?" (l. 2-4). This question insinuates that the infants born in this town were most likely the result of military prostitution or rape and with a mother who was most likely off selling her body and a father who did not know of their existence the children were alone from birth. This was the result of institutionalized prostitution with women being paired up with around twenty-nine men a day (Edwards 157).

Yi portrays birth in two ways. Line 5-6 talks about the process as pulling a potato out of the ground. In this depiction the baby is just one of many and is delivered without care. The second image is that of the numbed and disconnected mother (l. 7-8). Whereas the first image showed a careless process the second image has no process at all. The baby is just there all of a sudden. Both images fit within the social framework of the military town where no one cares or can care about the children because of its prostitution and poverty (Choi 129, xx).

The abjected state of the children is highlighted by putting them inside an image of war. The grotesque image of a child as foot soldier shows the wrongs of society. No one would send a child into war but the state of society is similar to war when a vulnerable child is sent into the world without the protection of a parent or an adult (l. 8-9, 11-12). Lines 11 and 12 criticize those who in power who can shield themselves easily through their acquired means. People without these means are more vulnerable yet they try to live just as long.

Another grotesque opposition in "Nursery Notes" is that between light and dark. "When the lights are off, this place remains in darkness" (l. 5). When are the lights off? During the day. The nursery however remains in darkness even though the light of the sun is outside. The light is present outside, on the surface of society. In this light the nursery seen from the outside as a normal building like any other. Within the building, within the cave, the dark reality of the situation is seen.

Binary oppositions such as light and dark, war and peace, dirty and clean are acknowledged in poetry across the globe. By employing these images and their connotations Yi tilts the specific situation of the military towns in Korea to a global level. The experience of the marginalized is no longer local but surpasses the borders and becomes global.

The last line of the poem “Please don’t forget how thoroughly the light hides the immense darkness...” seems to be a direct address to the reader to not forget the circumstances of the people who are not supported by society. She uses themes of despair and violence to question social institutions and also to have the audience interrogate the system (Choi xx, 129; Williams 409). Ignoring the situation would be like disinfecting your hands with alcohol hoping that you would catch what the others have. It would make the reader complicit in society’s wrongdoings.

Conclusion and Discussion

The question of this thesis was how the translated collection *An Anxiety of Words* would reflect the themes of abjection and marginalization in relation to the notion of the female grotesque. My thesis was wrong in the way that I thought that the female grotesque would be mainly used as a contrast to the works of traditional (male) poets. The female grotesque in general is not used as a contrast but rather as a female way of expression to discuss problems within the social institutions and gender norms of a patriarchal society.

The poets in *An Anxiety of Words* use the female grotesque because of the gender norms imposed on female poets and to talk about the grotesque things in reality. Ch'oe's poem "Went to the Sea in Winter" talks about the liberation of women through their children. Kim sets women with postnatal depression, who are not represented in media, in the center of her poetry by amplifying their experience in "Song of Skin". Yi closes the collection with "Nursery Notes", a poem about life and death within the lives of abjected children. The poems from Ch'oe, Kim and Yi are different in execution but all showed the marginalized position of women and children. The ones that are supposed to be protected in society are set to the side and these three poets move these people from the margins to the center of their poetry. Ch'oe Sung-ja, Kim Hyesoon and Yi Yon-ju give their subjects the power of speech that society has taken from them.

I also said in my hypothesis that *An Anxiety of Words* would be specific to the national historic context of Korea during the period of dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s but I was wrong to think so. Except for the instance of the Naktong River in Kim Hyesoon's poem "Song of Skin" all of the poetry can be read without knowing the national historic context of Korea to a large extent.

The collection and translation of the poems was started by Choi's critical consciousness. The introduction talks about both how Choi read the poems and was able to see the US and Korea as "two locations of unequal power" (xvi). Choi shows that these Korean poets were able to discuss themes

that are not limited to their national and historical context. This debunks my hypothesis and supports the argument that the poems in *An Anxiety of Words* lend themselves to talk about non-national and national contexts because their universal themes and literary devices.

However, the universal character of these poems would not have been recognized across the global if the poetry has not left Korea and Choi had not translated them. Choi's translations help a global audience to engage with Ch'oe, Kim and Yi. As a result the translations enable a global audience to think about the issues that are presented within the collection.

In answering the question on how the collection reflects on the themes of marginalization and abjection this thesis has argued for a non-national, global perspective on the poetry of Ch'oe, Kim and Yi while holding the female grotesque in regard. The lack of emphasis on the national historic theme leaves room to talk about the universal quality of the poetry and the poetry's message in the analyses. This universal quality is exactly why the poetry should not be defined to the local space but rather be placed within both a universal context as well as a national context.

One of the goals of this thesis was to add to the academic research that has been done on contemporary Korean female poets because of the discovery that the field is limited to Korean folklore and male poets. I think that it was successful in doing so by providing analyses on three prolific female poets. However, I would have liked to connect these women and their poetry to a bigger academic field than just the female grotesque. I had the intention to connect the female grotesque to transgressive circulation, a theory made popular by Johannes Göransson, but was unable to do so because of the scope of this thesis.

Therefore I would like to suggest the research of Johannes Göransson for further research. Göransson talks about the marginalized status of translations themselves and as a result engages with the same theme of the female grotesque on a meta-level.

Another option for further research would be to include Mikhail Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1968). In this book, Bakhtin uses the grotesque to talk about identity as the interaction between the social and the literary in combination with the (female) body. His concept of carnival

would be very interesting as a perspective on this collection. I would recommend this book for further research as it combines language and the grotesque without specifically including translation but focussing more on language as a whole. Language as a phenomenon would be a new and different perspective on these poems especially since Choi is a poet and a translator and this combination must have heightened her awareness of the words that she chose for her translations.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: “Went to the Sea in Winter” - Ch’oe Sung-ja

- 1 Went to the sea in winter.
Seagulls stretched their necks and shat white.
The corpse of a woman floated for three days,
then was caught by a patrol boat.
- 5 The woman’s vagina was opened to the sea
(the polluted sea).
Pale and sickly children poured out from her open vagina,
staggering from the sea’s bright sun.
Papery skin, the remains of the dead woman,
- 10 floating like plastic.
The children rode the froth of the waves and scattered
among the oceans of five continents.
They wove sturdy spider houses
in South Africa’s Pietermaritzburg or Odendaalsrus,
- 15 laid eggs in the ground of the jungles in the Philippines,
and in Berlin or Haussmann's boulevards in Paris
under the cover of night they spread syphilis.
One long unbearable night they’ll begin a revolution,
an invincible revolution.
- 20 Went to the sea in winter
(the polluted sea).

Appendix 2: “Song of Skin” - Kim Hyesoon

1 The open lips find my breasts
 though they weren't told where mine were,
 draining sweet water from my body.
 They want to suckle again right after they've eaten.

5 First, saliva evaporates inside my mouth,
 tears vanish from my eyes,
 veins shrivel,
 blood fades,
 trees and plants collapse,

10 the Naktong River dries up,
 and its floor shrieks as it explodes.
 My whole body is pumped out.
 Even though you vomit what you've just eaten,
 your open lips still hang onto my nipples

15 till my body is emptied
 of everything but dry bones and skin,
 till the heaven's castle splits
 and the Milky Way shatters,
 till I can think of nothing

20 and my soul withers and dies.

Appendix 3: “Nursery Notes” - Yi Yon-ju

1 Just born and already neglected, it lies in a coffin-like cradle. Smells
fishy as a butcher’s shop. Who will be able to guide the infants to a
faraway place, through the many trials of life until they reach the
silence of the aged? I fill up the basin and wash my hands.

5 When the lights are off, this place remains in darkness. Even the
infant born yesterday was pulled from the uterus like a potato; it’s
like that. Or the entire body is anesthetized for a cesarean and the
time of birth is announced, the hour when an infant is sent out onto a
battlefield like a foot soldier. I pick up an infant and watch the spots
10 on its face fill with yellow pus.

Shielding your body with guns and knives is not difficult, the
problem is finding the strength to resist, naked and without a single
prayer. But then prayers are only written for the dead ... I rub my
hands briskly with a cotton ball soaked in alcohol. Please don’t forget
15 how thoroughly the light hides the immense darkness ...